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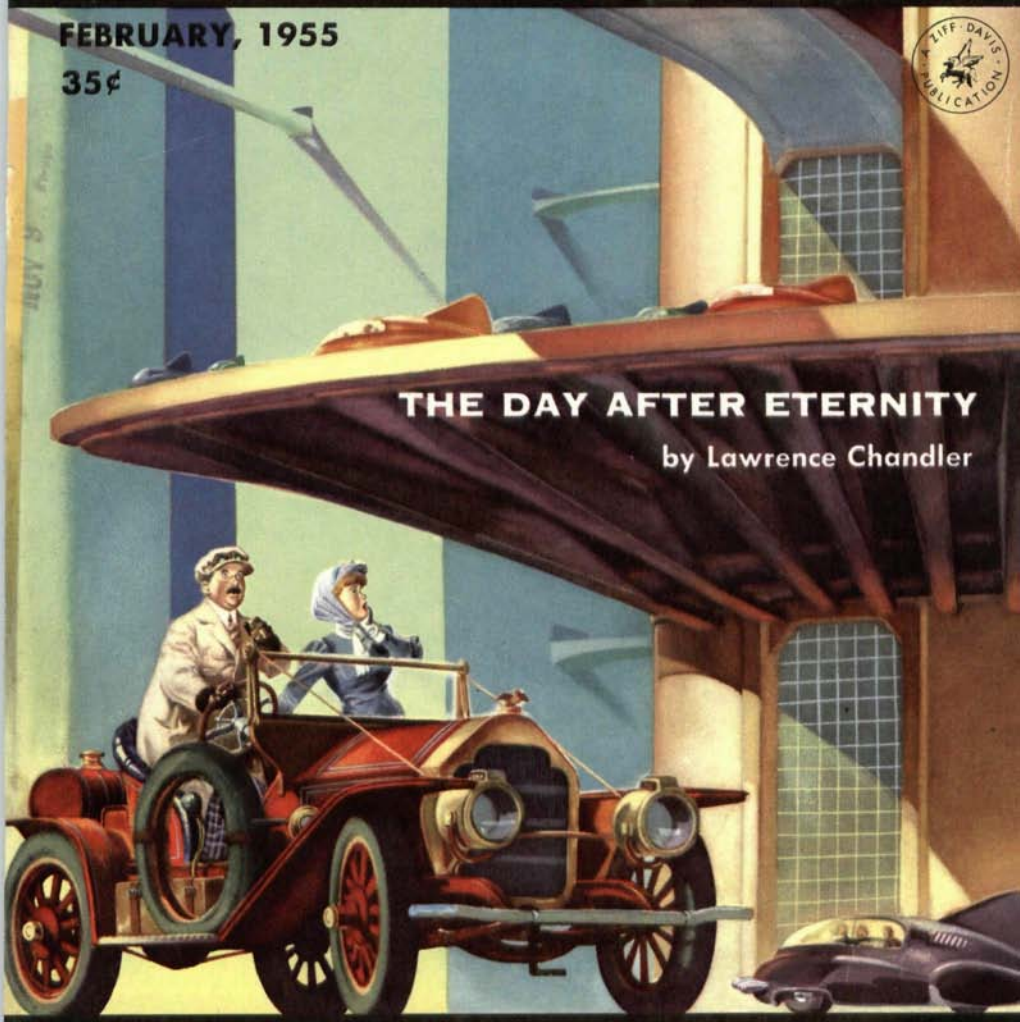

THE DAY AFTER ETERNITY

by Lawrence Chandler

Best NEW Fantasy and SCIENCE-FICTION

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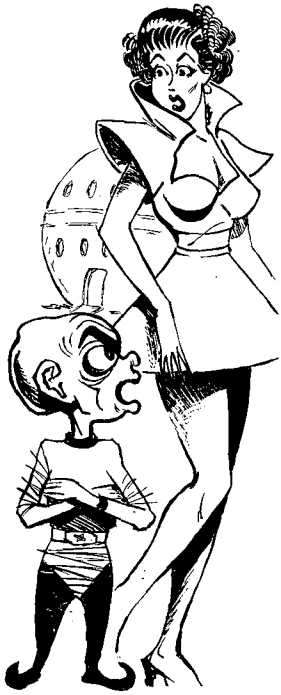
Sneak Preview of

THE BIG BLUFF—coming in the great

April issue of—**FANTASTIC**



The Chavorian ship was a big sphere, oblate and gleaming silver. Now that it had landed I couldn't see any rocket tubes any place. We Earthmen always think spaceship means rocket ship, which is silly because the Chavorians came from someplace maybe halfway across the galaxy and who knows if they ever heard of rockets?

When I got to the window, a large round opening had gaped in the surface of the Chavorian sphere. Fenner stared glumly at the floor and didn't see the Chavorians come out...

"They're so—so tiny," Bettylou gasped.

"Looks like we've been conquered by a bunch of midgets," Starbuck agreed with her.

The Chavorians—six of them emerged from the spaceship—looked so much like people I thought I was dreaming. Midgets, I mean, because not one of them was more than three feet tall. But they all looked mean and ornery and gazed around our town on Jamison like they already owned the place.

FIND OUT WHY BETTY LOU WAS MORE VALUABLE THAN A BATTLESHIP—READ ABOUT HER IN—THE APRIL FANTASTIC

—ON SALE JANUARY 7th.

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FEBRUARY 1955

Volume 4 Number 1

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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FROM OUR READERS . . .

Dear Mr. Browne:

Just finished December *Fantastic* and gleefully accept your invitation to write a letter. The covers of December *Fantastic* and November *Amazing* were superior to anything else on the newsstands. I especially liked the way the picture was an exact delineation of the main part of the story. . . . Another nice thing is the lack of advertising. Keep that up, too. Out of the five stories, two were no good, three were excellent. The no-goods were "The Spidery Pied Pipers," (because the denoument was a let-down) and the "Vicar of Skeleton Cove," (because what was at stake wasn't really important, was it?) . . . John Toland's "Water Cure" gets my vote for the most entertaining writing I've ever seen. Wilde has written a rich and rewarding thing that got a stupid title: "The Courtship of 53 Shotl 9 G." "The Appointment," by Stark, persuades me to keep just that with any more of his stories. . . . A complaint: don't mix science-fiction and fantasy in the same magazine! I like to read realistic extrapolation and be Amazed when I buy that one, and weird and spooky stuff justified by the title, *Fantastic*, when I buy that one. . . . Keep going as you are and you won't lose this steady customer.

Walter M. Sharrock
RFD Franklin Avenue, Oakland, New Jersey

○ *A great many readers like a touch of fantasy along with their science-fiction in* Amazing; *and the opposite in* Fantastic. *If any of our other readers would care to comment on this, here's the spot to do it. . . . See Mr. Peterson's letter, which follows, Walter; his remarks about Toland's story may make you as mad as it did us.—Ed.*

Dear. Mr. Browne.

I am not a regular reader of *Fantastic*; however I did pick up a copy the other day and find it impossible to refrain from tossing you a bouquet, which is, unfortunately tied to a brickbat. . . . The bouquet is for Niall Wilde's "The Courtship of 53 Shotl 9 G," which (despite a personal antipathy for Irish stories) I found very amusing, and even better, deftly written. . . . The brickbat is for that "sparkling novelette" by John Toland, "Water Cure." I have not had the dubious pleasure of reading such over-writing riddled with cliches since serving with the reviewing team in charge of criticizing efforts of first-year students in Fiction Writing.

Charles A. Peterson
2009 East Beverly Rd., Milwaukee 11, Wisconsin

● *More letters mean more pages of letters. Write to us; say what you like. It all goes in! See our next issue.—Ed.*

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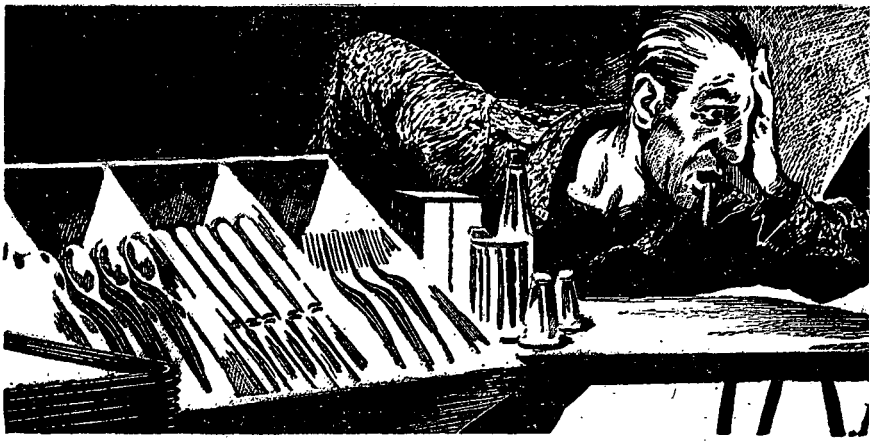

THE PATTY-CAKE MUTINY

By WINSTON MARKS

After years spent in space, the crew of the Discus had long since become inured to hardship, danger and fear. And then one day the ship landed on a new planet where the grass was like human hair and the earth oozed thin red blood. No wonder Murphy, the toughest miner ever to swing a pick, reverted to infancy in an effort to escape the horror of God's Head!

IT NEVER occurred to Slapper Kansas that a certain maternal instinct was an important ingredient in his genius as foreman of the six-man prospecting crew attached to the *Discus*. Indeed, his position of authority was more tacit than official, and he maintained it largely by virtue of his free-swinging, open-palmed hands that could break a Venusian watermelon in two as easily as most men could halve a ripe peach.

Slapper's great hands hung from thick, red-haired arms and a pair of shoulders even a pro, or prospector, looked twice at before sounding off.

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"Patty-cake, patty-cake, baker's man," Slapper intoned

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That these hard-calloused slabs should be called upon to play patty-cake with 220-pound Balls Murphy was among the most remote, unconsidered probabilities aboard the *Discus*.

It was in the early days of extra-T exploration, when man had done little more than count Alpha Centauri's 24 assorted planets. The lush, wicked life-forms that teemed on most Acey planets had long since discouraged all but a small army of fewer than a thousand prospectors who roved in crews of four to eight men, subsidized by several Earth corporations. The company put up the ship, facilities and a two-man ship's company, and the pros staked their lives. They worked on shares, and the goal was *kegnite*, a rich uranium ore in which this system abounded. Earth's great power plants were starving for radioactives, but personnel was the greatest problem.

Mortality was so great that the unmanageable element that did risk their necks was a hard-bitten lot of fools who would some day be glorified as pioneers—some day, but not yet.

At the time of the *patty-cake* incident, Slapper Kansas was having more than his usual trouble keeping peace in his crew. Instead of the estimated 118 days, planetfall on Alpha Centauri VII wasn't made for almost five months. The magnetics gave out on the last half light year, and they had to come in on jet deceleration which lacked the inertia-less effect that interstellar, magnetic-propulsion afforded.

Conkie Morton, who conked out under anything more than a gee and a half, was almost dead by the time they drew atmosphere. And Butch Bagley, Pokey Gannet and Sniffer Smith, were giving Balls Murphy the silent treatment. The over-long trip, it seems, had caused them to break their sacred rule against gambling in transit. Out of sheer boredom they began playing with Balls' cubes which he carved out of a pick-handle, and the inevitable happened. Balls had won the three men's anticipated profits from the shares mining.

Sniffer was so outraged he couldn't keep his mind on business, and the *Discus* circumnavigated the planet three times before he finally concentrated on the sounding instruments enough to get a marker down on a *kegnite* lode.

Sniffer had flunked out of

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metallurgy school in his youth, which automatically put him in charge of most technological functions of the crew. But his name derived not from his ore-detecting abilities so much as from his literal, olfactory talent. Sniffer could smell animal scents and noxious gases rods away. After a few unwashed weeks on an alien planet his life was a miserable effort to keep upwind from the rest of the crew.

"About damned time," Slapper rewarded him.

Sniffer's sensitive nostrils quivered as he looked down on the grassy tangle. "Lookit that hairy mess, would you. I can smell the stink clean through the hull."

Ignoring the idle complaint Slapper barked into the mike to the pilot. "You can back up and sit her down. Sniffer got a marker down finally."

Conkie groaned in his hammock as the ship slammed into four gees de-ac and reversed course. As the motion eased off he opened his eyes and peered down through the bottom ports. His face was pale from hours of retching, but his eyes were clear. He found the bright, yellow marker-stain that Sniffer had shot onto the surface. "Looks like some sort of deep grass mostly. Make it out, Pokey?"

Pokey Gannet's eyes weren't so keen, but his botanical curiosity caused him to provide himself with field lenses. These now hung around Balls Murphy's neck, another acquisition from the crap game. Balls was sulking, evincing no interest in planet-fall. "I can't make out nothing but blue-green," Pokey said with a glare at Murphy.

"Anyhow," he added, "I ain't in no rupturing rush to go muckin' around down there. I spent my shares already."

"Value received," Balls grunted, juggling the wooden dice with one hand and scratching one of the pendulous little knobs of flesh of his cheek with the other. The knobby spheres that gave him his name and grotesque disfiguration each contained a submicroscopic parasite that had baffled Earth doctors. It wasn't contagious, they announced, and they claimed success in arresting the disease, but Balls said they itched like hell. They were always pink and inflamed from his incessant scratching.

"We're on marker and coming down," Slapper told them. "Balls, you stay with Conkie and help him get on his feet. Rest of you get into your

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leathers and let's look around."

Normally Slapper was reluctant to leave Conkie behind on these original reconnaissances, because his extreme visual and hearing acuity was largely responsible for the fact there had been no mortalities since he joined the crew eight years ago. However, the plain below them seemed an uncommonly harmless *veldt* of swaying grasses.

The jets cut out as the still-functioning, secondary proximity-mags took over and cushioned the landing, which was unusually gentle. The speaker hummed, and the captain spoke to them: "Don't get into trouble. The mate and I will be tearing down the main drive, so we're here to stay for at least ten days."

"Don't worry yer tinsel head over it," Slapper retorted. "These slobs never yet loaded the *Discus* in less'n two weeks." He tightened the belt of his slick-worn, suede waders and snugged the gray, leather jacket to a tight fit at the waist. He popped the seal on the main port, swung open the inner and outer doors and yelled for Sniffer. "Take a smell, man; and give us the word."

Sniffer came forward breathing cautiously. The meager data they had on this planet showed plenty of oxygen. The automatic analyzers showed nothing inimical. But pros were innately suspicious of the over-sensitive instruments which were known to have failed on occasion. Besides gas pockets, highly irritating and sometimes poisonous pollens existed seasonally. It was these for which Sniffer sniffed with discreetly short inhalations. After a moment he shook his head. "Funny," he muttered, "all that grass and no pollen. Look how deep it is!"

On firm ground it would have been necessary to descend a 20-foot ladder to the surface, but here the *Discus* was sunk like a huge robin in a nest, so the fronds of grass protruded level with the open port.

Spaced only three or four inches apart, the stems grew to a remarkable uniformity of length, the tips narrowing to blunt points and waving gently like a field of grain in the gentle breeze. The murky overcast limited visibility to about a half mile, and the growth extended to the borders of their vision in all directions.

"Flora or fauna?" Slapper asked. He leaned over and

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snapped the tip from a stem that was about pencil-thickness in diameter. A green exudate cast a light, nostalgic aroma of freshly mowed lawn-grass among the four men.

Pokey Gannet plucked the stem-tip from Slapper's gloved fingers and touched the juicy end to his tongue. Tasting a new, extra-T plant-life form was typical of Pokey's suicidal habits of impulsive curiosity that had cost him dearly without teaching him sensible caution. He spat through the open port. "Chlorophyllic, all right. I'd say flora, the leaves certainly are, anyway."

His equivocating estimate was visibly justified by a skinful of scars of stings, bites and gashes garnered from poking about the unclassified, miscegenetic life-forms of a dozen planets. He dug a tiny triplex lens from his jacket pocket and studied the tissue closely for a moment. "Whoops! I don't like this so good," he muttered. "Surface of the stem is full of little bitty holes leading into a central channel. It's an air breather! I'd bet on it."

Butch stepped back from the port and dropped his slender hands to his guns nervously. "Dirty hypocrite! Got no business lookin' like a plant—"

"I didn't say it wasn't a plant," Pokey said. "But I ain't makin' book that it's harmless yet. Let's take it down to the lab and cut a section for the mike."

Slapper curbed his impatience. Each of his men had a specialty of sorts, and every time he bucked their advice in their individual fields he regretted it. He followed the others to the lab. They crowded around Pokey while he sliced a thin cross-section of the stem and slid it under the low power of the microscope.

Balls Murphys' voice reached them faintly. "Halloo! Where are you?"

Without thinking, Slapper replied, "Down here, Balls."

Back in the exit port Murphy tightened on his leathers, the breeze whispering in his ears. The sound of Slapper's voice reverberated in the lock chamber and seemed to come from the outside. For a moment he looked down into the waving blue-greenery, shrugged his shoulders and stepped off into the light gravity. He slipped smoothly and quickly out of sight.

In the lab, Pokey was muttering about the similarity of the tiny air tubes of the

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growth to the tracheolae of certain insects on Earth. Light, staggering footsteps at the door turned Slapper's head.

"Conkie! You up already?"

"Balls is in trouble," Conkie gasped. "Can't you hear him, dammit?"

The men listened, but none could match Conkie's sharp ears. Slapper said, "I told him to stay with you until——"

"I know, I know! I sent him along. I was feeling better. But he's over the side looking for you, and he's screaming his damned head off down there! Something's got him!"

"Well, now ain't that a shame," said Sniffer in his most nasal drawl. He was nearest the door, and Slapper cuffed him aside.

"Get on it!" he snapped over his shoulder, racing up the passage to the gear room. He snatched one of the long, razor-sharp knives from the rack and dove through the port. "Feed a line down after me," he called back without looking and began sliding down the ladder, hacking stems as he went.

There was no visible trace of Balls' passage, so he kept cutting as he descended in order to let in light. Slapper was no sentimentalist, but the dread silence that now existed below him gripped his heart with cold fingers. For eight years he'd jockeyed this crew around space without a fatality. Sure, they'd all lost a little blood, been gouged and stung, sucked at and half-strangled by the bastard life-forms that kept sane men on Earth. But he'd never lost a man, not for keeps, and the thought of Balls' ugly, puffy face missing from the mess table tightened his throat.

Unconsciously counting the 12-inch steps as he went down, Slapper slowed on number sixteen—and luckily so. His next groping step kicked the missing crewman full in the face. A grunt, then a feeble little cry emitted from Balls' lungs. He was huddled at the base of the ladder, a small battery-light dangling from his right wrist by a short cord. Tied to his left was the little prospector's pick that was a pro's standard reconnoitering tool.

"The line! Where's that line?" Slapper demanded, and before he could yell again a quarter-inch rope sawed across his cheek. He whipped it around Balls' shoulders and under his arms, knotted it and ordered, "You got a load."

He scampered up the lad-

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der ahead of the dangling body and found Sniffer casually winding in the portable winch he had taken time to rig.

Slapper back-handed him aside. "Don't strain yourself," he said and hauled the line in hand-over-hand—220 pounds of dead weight, minus gravity differences—on a coarse rope that cut even through his gloves.

A moment later a tangled ball of arms and legs wrapped around the leather-clad form of Balls Murphy rolled onto the mining-gear deck.

"Butch, get the medic kit," Slapper said. "Pokey, you and Sniffer bear a hand here. Help me straighten him out. He's wound up like a tangleweed."

Sniffer stepped on the Irishman's ankles while the other two men peeled his arms loose and gently straightened him out. A leg got away from Sniffer, and instantly Balls drew it up, doubled against his belly.

"Cramps?" Pokey asked.

Slapper shook his head as he peered into Balls' pinched white face and narrowed eyes. He stripped off the leathers and probed Murphy's body for abrasions. There were none. Breathing was shallow and quick and pulse even faster. "Better bed him down in the mess room. Might fall out of his hammock," he said. They wrapped him in a blanket and tried to lay him out straight, but as soon as they let go of him he rolled into a tight huddle, head down, arms crossed to his chest and legs drawn up tightly to his belly.

They tried to feed him coffee, but he spit it out of slack lips, bubbling and slobbering. They went over him again, inch by inch, but not the tiniest perforation of his clammy skin were they able to find.

Slapper opened the medic kit and treated him for shock. Gradually his color improved, but his pulse and breathing remained quick, much too quick. Slapper loaded a hypo and stabbed him with a buckshot dose of anti-infection serum. Balls winced and screamed like a baby. Sniffer curled his lip. "Well, did we sting his little bottom?"

Slapper scowled. "Shut up! This is more serious than it looks. I saw a case about fourteen years ago on Acey IV. The guys didn't take it serious, and the poor fool died. Never did find out what killed him, but the Earth docs said that from the description something scared him into—

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what did they call it?—infantile regression."

Slapper stood up and shook his head. "Look at that position. The foetal position, they call it. Like a new-born baby. And for all practical purposes that's the way we got to treat him until he snaps out of it, do you get me?" He glowered at the others.

Only Conkie showed any sign of sympathy, but then Conkie was the only one of the four who hadn't lost his share of the cargo profit to Balls in the crap game.

Slapper took this into account. "We all take turns at tending Balls," he announced; "but you take the first day or two, Conkie. Give you a chance to get your strength back, too."

Butch, Pokey, and Sniffer spat on the deck as one man. Sniffer said, "He kin suck his thumb off up to the elbow as far's I'm concerned. Hope he chokes."

The other two recalcitrants said nothing, but Slapper could see they felt the crew as a whole had executed its full responsibility by hauling Balls out of the grass. If he wanted to huddle on his back and play infant while they sweated out the *kegnite* which they already owed to him, that was his business, but they were damned if they'd play nursemaid in the bargain.

They cropped a small pile of the tubular grass and put a torch to it to make sure it wasn't too highly inflammable in the high-oxygen-content atmosphere. The greenery shrivelled up and charred easily, but it didn't sustain a flame.

Sniffer broke out the thermite bombs, which they ignited and tossed out the port. No one had an ache to descend into that rustling forest and probe the mystery of Balls' experience.

Thermite burns hot and unquenchably. They peppered the 30-foot circle of the yellow marker-stain with the little bombs and stood back to watch the results. The grass writhed, charred and went up in quick smoke followed by billows of hissing, stinking, yellow steam.

At the first whiff Sniffer turned pale and ran for the head. Before long the others gave in and slammed the port shut until the cookery was over. The smell that assailed them was sweetly, nauseatingly reminiscent of burnt animal flesh—charring blood and living tissue.

Two nine-hour rotations of

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the little planet were completed before the stench subsided enough for the men to venture out. At their feet was a blackened pit, some 20 feet deep at the edges where the grasses were burned back a few feet. The floor of the pit sloped in unevenly, each bomb having burned a yard wide crater of its own about two feet deeper. It was an unsightly, black wallow.

Pokey went down the ladder first, hacking a path the four feet out to the charred area with his knife. Then, cautiously, he bent to examine the terrain where it sloped up from dead to living. Slapper watched him raise his machete and chop down into the pink, rubbery surface. The knife slashed deep and a spurt of thin, red liquid splashed out and drenched his leg leathers. He swore and stepped back as the blood-red juice continued to gush inches into the air from the wound. The liquid came in surges, strong at first, then slowly weakening as the red stuff darkened and coagulated at the ends of the gash.

The men watched silently while Pokey satisfied himself as to the nature of the thing. The beefy little runt grasped a strand of grass and heaved on it until it came out by its single, stringy root—like a whisker plucked from the chin of a giant. No "blood" filled the follicle-like hole, but a thin serum rose slowly, and Pokey took samples.

Butch was standing guard with both pistols out. Conkie had left Balls to his own cooing and gurgling and was peering sharply at the rim of the pit, watching and listening for the slightest motion or sound that could mean sudden death on a strange planet.

Nothing happened. An hour later Pokey came out of the lab and voiced his opinion. "It's a new one, but then ain't they all?" He shrugged.

"Animal or vegetable?" Slapper asked.

"Both." Conkie's reply surprised no one. "It's a single big hunk of life, spread out in all directions it looks like. Breathes air through the stems and supports animal tissue with a pretty efficient blood system, haemoglobin and all. A lot thinner than human blood, but damned if there aren't corpuscles, platelets and all! What's more, it's warm-blooded."

"What's it eat?" Sniffer wanted to know.

"Air, sunshine and minerals. I pried under it, and

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there's a hundred little filaments digging deep into the soil under every tube of grass. The transfer from chlorophyll to blood system happens right at the follicle. Must be hearts or pumps of some kind spaced around every so often. Pulse runs about 45 beats a minute. Temperature 68.3 F. Course it mighta been running a fever around that gash I cut."

"Anything dangerous about it?" Slapper asked.

"Nothing I could see. I think it has a nervous system. There's little white fibers running along under the surface. Might be a center of intelligence somewhere, but I couldn't see any specialized organs. Nope. Looks about as dangerous as a scalp of hair without a head under it. About a two-foot thick scalp."

Slapper frowned. "Nothing to explain what scared the bejeezis out of Balls, eh?"

Pokey shook his head. "Not unless the goldbrick has been hidin' a case of claustrophobia from us all this time. That grass would be mighty thick closing in over a man's head."

Slapper gave it up, issued the necessary orders and the crew fell to with the drills and explosives. The pocket of *kegnite*, typically, was near the surface, and little stripping was necessary to reach the crumbly ore. Their location was somewhat north of the equator, and it was the summer season, so fitting their labors to the hours of daylight, they worked five hours and rested four. Their labors, thus, averaged almost 14 hours per terrestrial *day*.

On the second day the yellow sun, Alpha Centauri, broke through the clouds and burned off the protecting vapors. Slapper rigged a canopy, but the work became almost unbearable as the temperature mounted over a hundred and ten. Suddenly the men became solicitous about Balls Murphy's welfare and began hinting that they would like to relieve Conkie at his baby-sitting duty.

Slapper grinned and arranged a schedule. With Balls out of action the crew was 17 percent short-handed, and as Slapper had predicted, it took another man constantly attending him to keep him from smothering in his blankets or otherwise injuring himself. Balls had the mental outlook and reflexes of a week-old baby, but his muscles were quite a problem. They fed him out of a narrow-necked plastic bottle, and if his gruel

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wasn't on hand when he was hungry he screamed and kicked and tore at his itching face with murderous fingernails.

So, reluctantly, Slapper assigned another sixth of his manpower to stand watch, day and night over Balls. The work seemed to progress even more slowly than the shorthandedness would justify. At the end of the tenth shift Slapper checked the ship's hold, capacity two hundred tons. He estimated less than ten tons of ore had been mined and loaded.

He returned to the mess ward where his crew was chewing on their evening ration of protein cakes and swilling huge cups of reconstituted powdered milk. Balls Murphy was propped up in a corner, naked except for an over-size diaper with ravelled edges where it had been torn from a bedsheet. He was studying his toes, his head wobbling loosely and his mouth open.

Slapper looked down the table. "You guys must like it out here."

"Sure. It's lovely," Butch said sarcastically. "What's the gripe?"

Slapper drew a cup of milk from the mixing valve and spraddled a chair. "At the rate we're going we'll be two and a half months loading the cargo."

Sniffer glared over his shoulder at Balls, who was trying to focus his wide eyes on the conversation. "Thanks to him!" Sniffer grunted.

"Partly," Slapper granted. "But partly thanks to your thick-headed gambling." He pointed at Sniffer, Pokey, and Butch. "You three guys have been runnin' a contest to see who could load the least ore in a shift. Now get this. We stay here until that hold is fulla *kegnite* if it takes a year."

Pokey grinned back at him defiantly. He took a little notebook from his pocket and studied the figures. "I checked the food inventory yesterday. According to my figures we push off in just nineteen days, terrestrial. You might starve us, Slapper, but the pilot and mate ain't goin' to stand still for it."

Slapper sloshed the tepid milk around in his mouth thoughtfully. "So we run out of food. So we forage." Even as he said it he knew he was bluffing.

"Forage? You mean we got to start eating Hairy Joe?" Pokey had long held to the theory that the bastard, vege-

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table-animal organism that matted the landscape was the sole life-form on A. C. VII, and Slapper was forced to agree that it seemed reasonable.

Eating any alien foodstuff was a hazardous experience and normally a desperate act of last resort, but Slapper set his jaw. "Pokey, as of now you're a foraging party of one. You said yourself that Hairy Joe's flesh looked a lot like Earth meat under the microscope. I want you to slice off a few steaks and see how they cook up."

"And if it don't eat good?"

"Then we raise ship, soon as the skipper gets the drive fixed—and we scout around. We don't *know* that there isn't other life on Acey Seven."

Not even Conkie liked the plan. The four men stared down the table at him, and Butch finally got to his feet. He hooked a thumb in each holster, his dark, intense face pale around the eyes. His mouth formed a wicked little oval, lips drawn so tight they were rimmed with white.

"Slapper," he began in a husky voice, "you been doin' the thinkin' for this outfit too long. I've taken your orders and I've taken your cuffing around but nobody's going to stuff Hairy Joe meat nor any other stinkin' extra-T filth down my neck."

Slapper began to get to his feet, and Butch screamed, "Siddown! I ain't through!" The foreman moved slowly and deliberately around the table toward the gunman. Butch waited, his mouth pinched in like a man without teeth. He waited until Slapper was almost within reach, then the slender wrists rotated in one leather-slapping blur, and each hand came up levelling a pistol at Slapper's belly.

Slapper stopped. It was the first time Butch had ever made a fast draw without firing, and it was close. Too close. His eyes were insane little agates. He seemed to be controlling his trigger fingers with a great effort.

"I'll tell you what I want you to do," Butch said in a cracked voice. "I want you to go over in the corner with Balls Murphy and play patty-cake. That's right, you heard me. Patty-cake."

Slapper relaxed his shoulders. He had supposed some day it would come to a showdown with Butch. The rest of them he could handle, but Butch wore guns. He was the gunney for the whole crew, and he wouldn't take off the

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weapons even to sleep. Never before, however, had Butch touched his weapons in a crew dispute. It was an unthinkable, cowardly gesture among pros to threaten a man with anything but your bare hands.

Butch was no coward. That Slapper knew. But every man has his breaking point, and Butch's was his semi-hysterical hatred of alien life-forms. That's why they called him "The Butcher." That's why they trusted his flaming weapons to protect them on planets with vicious animals, reptiles, birds and even plant life. Every member of the crew owed his life ten times over to the speed and accuracy of Butch Bagley's marksmanship.

It wasn't too amazing, then, that Slapper's insistence on sampling Hairy Joe as a ration-extender should stir a revulsion and maniacal revolt in the lean, neurotic killer.

Slapper looked down at the small, lethal weapons, the tense fingers curved on the triggers. It was not the first time his authority had been challenged, but it was the first time his very life hung precariously in the balance.

To back down before his crew was a bitter loss of face that would ultimately cost him an acre of skin from his knuckles. Yet, adaptability to a situation was the first law of survival. Pros who debate such matters at excessive length die young. Slapper had already survived 19 years among the planets, so his decision came somewhat more quickly, if not more easily, than it would from a younger, less case-hardened pro.

"Yeah, sure, Butch. I think that would be nice," Slapper agreed in a flat voice. He moved over to Balls' corner and squatted before the huge, diapered Irishman.

Slapper reached for one of the limp hands. Balls grabbed Slapper's great thumb and tried to put it in his mouth. "Come on, boy, Butch wants us to play a game," Slapper insisted, bringing Balls' two hands up in clapping position. "Here we go. 'Patty-cake, patty-cake, baker's man'——"

Behind him Butch laughed derisively and addressed the other four men at the table. "Ya see? He's not such a big man after all. We don't have to hang around Acey Seven and starve, and we don't have to eat no rotten Hairy Joe, neither."

There was silence, then

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Conkie spoke. "Put up the guns, Butch. We're with you."

"I won't. Not until we get this settled. I'm done taking orders from a crazy foreman with ideas like eatin' steaks off of Hairy Joe."

There was another silence, then Pokey asked softly, "You got any suggestions who ought to be foreman, Butch?"

Slapper smiled to himself. "'—mark it with T, and put in the oven for——'" he continued. He knew what was in their minds. Every pro crew in the system had a foreman, one strong man whose main job was to keep the men from tearing at each others' throats. He held the job because he was big enough and tough enough and made more right decisions than wrong ones.

The embarrassing question Pokey had posed was, who was big enough to take and *hold* the job from Slapper? The tone in Conkie's and Pokey's voices had been plain. They weren't taking orders at gun's point, not for future execution.

"Don't get me wrong," Butch said, somewhat subdued. "I ain't striking for the job."

"'—baker's man. Bake a cake, fast as you can——'" Slapper's voice rose in volume and dominated the silence. He turned to the conference. "Gentlemen, may I make a suggestion? Just as a member of the crew, of course."

No one answered, so the big red-head continued. "Now that the mutiny is over, we got a problem. Who's the new leader? Since none of you seems anxious to take over the job, and since you all seem to sanction firing me—at gun's point—then it looks like there is only one other candidate we can vote for."

He let the remark hang in the air. Finally Butch grunted, "All right, who? The pilot? You know damn well he won't fraternize with a pro crew."

"No, not the pilot nor the mate. I nominate my friend, here, Balls Murphy."

Sniffer snorted through his big nose. "You nuts?"

"Not at all," Slapper replied calmly. "You seem to want a foreman you can push around. Balls is your man. If he gets mean just cut off his bottle."

"Wait a minute," Conkie said, getting the idea. "I think I see what Slapper means. Since Balls won't be issuing any orders for awhile that leaves five of us to take a vote

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on decisions. An odd number so there won't be any ties."

"No dice," Butch snarled. "Slapper's goin' to the brig. That's my vote. If we leave him loose, no matter who we elect he's got control again with them big mitts of his."

Slapper fixed the gunman with a cold stare. "Anything to welch on a gambling loss, eh, Butch? If you lock me up and take off when we run out of rations you will have a light load. Of course, it's no hide off of you, since you owe your share to poor Balls, here."

The taunt struck home. Pros were gambling men. Back on Earth they lived to eat, drink and gamble between trips. But mostly to gamble. And to a gambling man a gambling debt is a debt of honor. Butch's face showed his indecision. If it got around that he had chiselled out on Balls Murphy, he'd have no face among pros anywhere—and the ones who counted most with him were the men at the table before him, ready to turn on the silent treatment.

"Will you promise to keep your damned hams off of us if we turn you loose?" Butch demanded.

Slapper nodded. "On one condition—that you keep on being nice to Balls. Lay a finger on him and all bets are off."

Butch's face relaxed into a smirk. It was an easy, face-saving solution. "Why, we just elected Balls foreman. Nobody's going to hurt our sweet little foreman, are they, men?"

And so ended the Patty-Cake Mutiny, no blood, no sweat and only a few tears—from Balls Murphy who screamed for his bottle and needed changing.

Two hours later Slapper Kansas slipped out of his hammock, moved quietly to the mess room where Balls was bedded down and closed the door tightly. He awakened the infantile Irishman and gave him a bottle of milk. Balls swallowed it gratefully and cooed at him.

"Balls, my friend, you and I are going to play some more patty-cake. And maybe some peas-porridge-hot."

He grasped the heavy wrists and began clapping them together murmuring the nursery rhyme softly. The big blank eyes seemed to focus on him, and for the second time this evening Slapper saw faint, troubled recognition in them.

Somehow, ore production

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increased on the next shift. Pokey, Sniffer, and even Butch, still smarted under the flat accusation that their dogging it was a form of welching on their gambling debt to Balls Murphy. Slapper watched them at the drills, explosives and sorting screens, watched them bend to their scoops. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the improved sag on the portable conveyor.

Slapper Kansas was not entirely dissatisfied with the results of the mutiny.

At the end of the fifth hour he knocked off, but the others, perversely, continued working until it was pitch black. Slapper ignored them, climbed into the ship and equipped himself with a long, sharp knife. Back at the edge of the pit again, he slashed twice vertically, into the meaty growth that surrounded them. Then one heavy, horizontal cut and he began trimming away skin and the bottom tendrils. When he was through he was well-covered with thin blood, but a great steak lay on the flat of his blade.

He left the others to their overtime work and sought out the galley.

Little cookery was undertaken on these trips. All food was concentrated and precooked, but the company provided a hi-freak broiler in case anyone insisted on a hot meal.

Slapper washed off the blood, salted the meat thoroughly, crammed it into the tray and closed the broiler door on it. To be safe he gave it a full 30 seconds. The timer clicked, and cautiously he tilted the door open with a frankly puckered look around his freckled nose.

The aroma was a shock, an olfactory delight so sharp it was almost painful. He withdrew the sizzling meat and dropped it on the middle of the mess-room table without benefit of platter.

Ask any pro about the quality of the food he has to eat. He'll likely answer, "Well, it ain't bad, and it ain't good. It just ain't." Never since the armies of the 20th Century began tricking out K-rations and other concentrated packets for men in the field, had anyone succeeded in devising a truly delicious diet that featured high nutrition and compact bulk. Earth's corporations who financed these trips did their best with the advanced methods of preservation, but before a pro landed at his destination he was always yearning for fresh food,

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mainly fresh, juicy, dripping *meat.*

The slab of meat before Slapper looked like a Porterhouse; it was more tender and fine-grained than a filet mignon, and it smelled like heaven. The cautious little scrap that the ex-foreman sampled brought a rush of saliva to his jaws. He chewed slowly, thoughtfully, fighting the desire to gnaw off a real chunk.

Here goes, he thought, letting the juice slip down to his eager stomach, but his doubts were fast vanishing. Nothing that delicious could possibly be poisonous.

When there was no immediate reaction from his gastric equipment other than an impatient belch, Slapper threw caution to the winds.

Ten minutes later the four sweating crewmen followed their noses to the mess-room and stared at the ragged remains of a two-pound steak. They sniffed the smoky tang from the cooling broiler and noted the juice-slobbered table. Slapper cleaned up the mess silently and went over to play with Balls Murphy. The others drew their rations from the dispenser and ate, likewise in silence.

At dusk, eight hours later, Slapper cut three steaks, cooked them and presented himself at the skipper's wardroom with a steaming platter. The usually faultlessly uniformed officer was naked to the waist and unshaven. "What do *you* want?" he demanded.

Then his eyes and nose discovered the steaks. Slapper handed them over. "Compliments of the crew, sir," he said politely. "We've tested them—local fauna—delicious. No ill effects. If your rations are as low as ours you'll probably want to stretch them. It seems we'll be quite awhile finishing with the mining operation."

"Well, thanks, Kansas. Smells edible. We've got our troubles, too. Davis and I are up to our ears in the main mags. Have to rewind three fields by hand, splicing every damned turn. I was getting a little concerned about the food, myself. Can you supply us with plenty of this meat?"

"All you can eat, sir. I'll tend to it myself."

It was the longest and most cordial conversation on record between a pro and a ship's officer.

When Slapper returned to the galley it was well smoked up. Butch was the only holdout. He chewed on cold ra-

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tions while the others ate Hairy Joe steaks. Slapper sat down and consumed his own with gusto. Halfway through he had a thought. He sliced a chunk off and went over to Balls.

"Open up, fellow. Let's see if you've learned to chew yet." Balls let him stuff the morsel between his teeth, sucked at it for a moment then began chewing slowly, letting the rich juice stream from the corners of his mouth. He made a ludicrous sight, hunched in the corner, naked, diapered, a touch of silver in his short, black hair. But Slapper didn't laugh. The man needed the best psychiatry on Earth to snap him out of this regression.

Or did he? Slapper caught that glimmer of intelligence again. He squatted down and began playing peas-porridge-hot with the knobby-faced pro. Haltingly, Balls was learning to slap his beefy thighs with both hands, then raise them palms out and meet Slapper's huge paws. Each time he succeeded a big grin spread over his ugly face, fading into puzzlement.

Slapper occupied himself for a few minutes, turned in with the rest and simulated sleep. When the others were snoring he returned to Balls and continued the coaching process behind closed doors.

Having satisfied themselves that Hairy Joe constituted nothing of a hazard, the crew —with Slapper abstaining— voted to knock off the baby-sitting watch. At night Balls slept peacefully in the corner of the mess-room. During the day they lowered him to the pit and parked him on a cleared area of Hairy Joe's warm, pulsating skin where he watched with big-eyed interest the mining operations. This freed the baby-sitter, and the crew was back to 5/6ths full strength.

Slapper worked hard in the pit. Increasing his tempo of digging slowly he raised the output of the four others. No longer under his domination, nevertheless they disliked being outworked. The conveyor belt sagged and screeched more and more, and the ship's hold filled more rapidly.

It took the skipper and mate three Earth-weeks to complete the repair. Slapper talked it over with the officers, and they agreed that with the extra meat supplement they could stretch their rations some time yet.

Slapper reported the conversation back to his crew-

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mates. "So there you are," he concluded. "They are willing to stay on and shoot for a full cargo if we are."

"Count me in," Conkie said at once.

"Sure, sure," Sniffer said. "You got your full share coming. I vote we drag our tails offa this hot box as of now. It ain't our fault we've been short-handed."

Pokey dropped his D-handled ore-scoop. "Me, too. I can just taste that beer runnin' down my throat."

Butch laughed in Slapper's face. "How you votin', Kansas? Guess how, boys! Only it won't do you no good. It's three against two. We really been puttin' out the work, and like Sniffer said, it ain't our fault that baby brown-eyes over there went and—" His face went blank. "Balls! Where is he?"

Slapper wheeled and stared at the spot where they had left their infantized crewmate. He was gone. The grass stalks were bent slightly to indicate where he had entered the weird, miniature forest, but they could make out no sound or sight of him.

Slapper caught up one of the great knives they had brought down to cut their steaks and began hacking the grass aside. Conkie Morton, also knife in hand, worked at his side. Together they hacked a four-foot swath.

"Higher," Slapper yelled once. "You want to cut his ball-bearing head off?"

Less than twenty feet from the pit they found Balls on hands and knees talking baby-talk to himself and staring down at a small mound in the throbbing flesh of Hairy Joe. Obviously he was all right, and Conkie immediately lost interest. But his curiosity got him down to examine the little hump.

It pulsated strongly with a faintly audible ke-thump! ka-thump!

"Hey, Slapper!" he said. "Here's one of the hearts. You know, like Pokey figured. There'd have to be a lot of independent hearts spaced around to keep up the blood pressure."

Slapper, who was herding Balls back through the slot in the grass turned and examined the calculating expression on Conkie's slender face.

"What's on your mind, lad?"

"Look, Slapper. Suppose we cut about a ten-foot circle around this heart, pry the whole slab loose and plant it aboard the *Discus?* Suppose it just happens to live until we

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get back. And suppose it takes root all right back on Earth."

"It'd probably bleed to death," Slapper objected.

"Maybe, and then again maybe not."

"It needs a lot of dirt to grow in."

"The hold is still about a third empty, and we're outvoted on staying to fill it up. Lets spread soil on top of the ore and plant Hairy Joe in his own soil. Then the experts on Earth can analyze the dirt and make sure Joe's planted in what he likes back there."

"What about light? The thing would probably die in the dark hold."

Conkie ran out of patience. "Hell, maybe a lot of things, but think what we'd have if we got it back intact and it grew on Earth like it does here!"

"Maybe," said Slapper half to himself, "maybe I'm just jealous because I didn't think of it myself. Come on, let's see what the others say."

Together they towed Balls back to the pit and unfolded their plan. Even Butch's eyes lighted up a little. As much as he hated alien life-forms, the thought of making the trip pay off after all was thoroughly attractive.

Pro crews came in for a full share of anything of value they brought back. Pokey said, "We'll hold out for a royalty arrangement. If they make the brute produce it'll run the live-stock people out of business. Imagine, tenderloin steaks two feet thick, growing right out of the soil! No feed, no fences, no jeep-boys to round them up. And what a yield per acre!"

It was a messy, strenuous project. As Slapper had predicted, Hairy Joe bled copiously when cut. They reduced the mess somewhat by slicing carefully and tieing off the larger blood-vessels.

Even so they were wading in the thin blood before the circular incision was completed. Then there was the logistics of the matter. Their collective enthusiasm increased their fear of failure as well, and they decided not to risk damaging the thousands of delicate roots. Instead they dug deeply around and under their precious, bleeding slab and undertook to transport two feet of dirt along with it.

The whole mass came to some two tons, and they had to ring a platform sling, which they fabricated from a metal bulkhead torched out of the ship's interior.

It took four shifts to complete the job—some twenty

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hours during which another hundred thousand credits worth of *kegnite* might have been mined and loaded. But no one, not even Slapper, mentioned this.

The ex-foreman gave the signal to take off, and the *Discus* lifted clear of Acey VII bearing aloft with it a still bleeding, faintly-pulsing segment of the largest single life-form ever discovered by Earthmen.

When the excitement quieted, Butch Bagley and Sniffer Smith convulsed into a fit of vomiting. The continuous smell of blood did it for Sniffer, and Butch's subconscious revulsion with the whole idea finally gained the upper hand. Conkie Morton, of course, passed out under the initial acceleration and didn't recover until they were clear of the system and moving into inertia-less drive under the repaired mags.

So it was that Slapper had almost ten days of uninterrupted opportunity to work on the rehabilitation of Balls Murphy. Balls' mental redevelopment was at a much advanced degree over the chronological passage of time since his retrogression. Instead of a bubbling babe of one month he was already a toddler beginning to repeat a few words after Slapper.

The first thing Conkie did when he climbed out of his sick-hammock was to look in on Hairy Joe. The plant-animal was not exactly thriving. The grassy stalks were drooping over almost double and the pulse was weak.

When Butch and Sniffer recovered and learned the critical condition of their precious cargo, they insisted that lights and heaters be run into the unheated hold. Pokey helped and added a pair of fans to circulate the air gently.

When all was done that they could think of they retired to the mess-room to argue and bicker over the division of the spoils.

Slapper stayed out of the wrangle at first. He and Conkie were in the minority on all issues, it seemed, so he hunkered in his corner with Balls behind an improvised play-pen of chairs.

Butch was enumerating the obvious reasons why Balls should not be cut in on the proceeds, if any, from Hairy Joe. These included Balls' incapacitation for the whole working period which ran them short-handed and made them return with less than a full cargo of *kegnite*.

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Conkie rebutted, "It wasn't Balls' fault he got put out of it. I'm for cutting him in for a full share."

Pokey said, "He's got four shares of the *kegnite* now. What more you gonna give him?"

"And we dug it without his help," Sniffer agreed. "First he wins it from us, then we dig it for him. Hell with him! I'm for dealing Balls out on Hairy Joe."

Butch, strangely enough, was feeling slightly more charitable. "Oh, let's cut him in for a sixth of one share and split the rest of his share among us. After all, if he hadn't wandered off in the grass Conkie wouldn't have found the heart and got the idea. How about it Slapper?"

As a conciliatory move it was far beneath Slapper's dignity to answer. He simply grunted and continued speaking monosyllables to Balls.

Butch felt very piqued. "What're ya trying to do with Balls, anyhow? Trying to beat some psycho-quack out of a job? You'd think he was a godhead the way you—"

"God's Head!" Balls' normal, deep voice boomed out. "God's Head!" he repeated with a rising note of panic. He struggled to his feet and swayed pressing his fists to his eyes.

Slapper moved fast to the water dispenser, kicking chairs aside and snatching a cup. He filled it and dashed its contents into Balls' face then caught the big man as he stumbled forward.

When he opened his eyes he stared about him, down at the crude diaper knotted below his bare belly, around at the chairs hemming him in, at the strained, individual faces of his crewmates and finally down at the diaper again.

"What," he said slowly, "in the goddamhell have you been doin' to me?"

He shook off Slapper's supporting hand and glared about. "Well, speak up, you crummy slobs! What kind of a thing is this to—to——" He backed against the bulkhead and covered his eyes again.

Slapper gripped him by the shoulder. "Hang on, Balls! Don't let go again. For over a month I been trying to get you to tell us what happened down there. Down in the deep grass, remember?"

He led Balls to the table and got him into a chair. "Mix him some coffee, will you Conkie?"

Conkie made it double strong, and Balls let it scorch his throat until tears came to

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his eyes. He shook his head. "Got a feeling I been away for a while. Away—away, way back."

Slapper leaned forward. "You got a shock, Balls, and we still can't figure out what it was that—that, well, sort of knocked you off your rocker."

Conkie said, "What happened when you went down the ladder into the deep grass?"

"Deep grass!" Balls dropped his head onto his arms and shivered for several minutes.

"Was it claustrophobia?" Slapper asked at last, fearing the Irishman was slipping back into retrogression. "Here, drink some more coffee, man."

Balls raised his head weakly. His face was drawn. "Perhaps it was," he said. "Just a little bit. But that wasn't the whole of it. I remember the whole crazy thing now. I was climbing down the ladder thinkin' about the crooked dice, and——"

Butch came out of his seat. "What do you mean, crooked dice? I got them right here." He fished two wooden cubes from his pocket. "I rolled 'em two thousand times afterwards, trying to figure them crooked."

"No, not them. The other ones. I made two pair. Palmed the others and hid 'em," Balls said slowly. "It was just a gag. I was going to——"

The blood surged into Butch's face and he lashed a fist across the table. It caught Balls high on the cheek and snapped his head back.

The action caught Slapper entirely by surprise, but his reflexes were equal to the occasion. His left hand cut a short, open-fingered arc and smashed Butch back against the bulkhead with stunning force. The gunman's hands went feebly to his hips, but his legs folded under him and he sank to the deck.

Pokey snarled deep in his throat. "You had no call to do that, Slapper. You heard Balls admit——"

Slapper aimed one at Pokey who ducked. It caught Conkie a glancing blow and brought him up inflamed. "You promised to keep your damned mitts to yourself."

"On the condition that no one touched Balls——"

Sniffer had launched himself at the newly, self-appointed foreman from behind.

Balls, himself, was confused. He had taken his share of cuffing from the red-head-

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ed foreman, and just recently he remembered a cup of water full in his face. Lowering his head he went to work on Slapper's belly with the second largest pair of fists aboard the *Discus*.

It was entirely to Slapper's liking. The blows he took were heavy. Many of them had several years' pent-up grievances behind them. They hit him from both sides, the back and the front. His light, in-transit jumper tore to shreds under the clutching, battering, horny callouses of ten flailing fists.

Given enough time, Slapper knew, they could cut him down through sheer loss of blood, so he gauged his defense carefully. With both elbows high he protected his face and both sides of his jaw with his open hands. They hacked murderously at his body, but he managed finally to swing loose and single out Butch, who was weakest of the lot by virtue of the first tremendous slap he had absorbed.

Slapper rushed him like a bull and felled him with one blow. This time Butch stayed down. Whirling, Slapper felt one of his pile-driving elbows dispose of another opponent.

The rest was easy. First he flipped thick, squatty, little Pokey off his feet with an open uppercut to the chin. A quick chop to the neck with the rock-edge of his right hand floored Sniffer.

Balls Murphy was, at this point, attempting a bull-rush of his own, head down and feet churning, but his diaper slipped to his knees and tripped him. Slapper kicked him casually along the side of the head as he went down, and peace reigned in the pro's mess of the *Discus*. Slapper Kansas was once more foreman.

The remainder of the trip was notable only for the telling and retelling of Balls' experience. "Like I said," he explained, "I never talked much about it, but my Irish mother was pretty religious. She used to rock me to sleep sayin' over and over agin, 'Yer safe as on God's Head, me lad. Just be a good boy, and you'll always be safe as on God's Head.'

"Well, here I was standin' on this palpitatin' mess of meat balls you guys call Hairy Joe, and I look around me at all this hairy lookin' hair, and this old sayin' of my mother comes back to me about bein' good and I'd wind up safe on God's Head. Now, I'll admit it, I was feelin' a little guilty of

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takin' you boys with the loaded dice—even, mind you, even with full intentions of not collectin'—perish the thought! But anyhow, I ain't led an exactly immaculate life, and here I was down in this spooky, hairy stuff, all by my lonesome.

"I keep tellin' myself to quit bein' silly. It was just a bunch of grass. So I turn on my light, grab ahold of a stem and jerk. And out it comes like a hair by the roots. I turn my flashlight down on the hole, and so help me, the hole it comes out of looks nothin' else but like a flea's-eye-view of God's Head. There's the pore it come from, and there's a mess of palpitatin', pink scalp!

"I say to myself, Murphy, don't be a damn fool. Not even God's got a head this big. And to prove it I swing my little pick into Hairy Joe, and damned if God don't start bleedin' all over me. I like to passed out!

"I look up, and it's dark and crowded with hair, and I get the awful feelin' that God's about to raise His right hand and smack me like a mosquito that's bit Him. That's when I guess I flash back to my mother's arms, and—well, you know the rest."

Slapper made his regular, verbal report to J. Killsworth Farnum, the corporation representative, when they got back. Farnum had word of the strange cargo in advance of Slapper's visit. For the first time in their long but formal acquaintance, the executive arose to shake hands with the foreman.

"You've created quite a sensation with that overgrown tenderloin you brought back. Our lab reports it's recovering very well. If it lives up to our expectations your crew's share of the royalties will be considerable."

"Yeah," Slapper acknowledged. "I hear there's quite a panic around the Chicago stockyards."

"You have no idea the stir it's making," Farnum said pleasantly. "How was the voyage? Any trouble with your crew?"

"Nah. Nothing unusual. A little quibble about splittin' the shares, but we got that straightened out. Matter of fact, only had one mutiny the whole trip, and that didn't amount to a damn."

THE END

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"Look, kid," the officer said. "Just kind of drop that gun!"

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THE GUN

By JOHN BERNARD DALEY

It was one of those crazy situations everybody refused to take seriously: a scared twelve-year-old boy holed up in a cave, threatening an army of cops with nothing more than a box-top type of plastic ray-gun.

But when the bodies started piling up it ceased to be a joke. Only one man was able to come up with the right answer—and even he was wrong!

THERE'S a twelve-year-old kid holed up in a cave on a hillside here. The cops can't get to him. Yeah, Township cops; about six or seven squad cars. Listen; get this now—the story is that the kid killed two people with a ray gun. What? Yeah, a ray gun."

A brown hand reached across Grayber's left shoulder and folded over the mouthpiece of the telephone. "That's all, mister."

Grayber turned to his left and saw a young man in a gray gabardine suit. Except for the hard, immobile face he looked ordinary enough, but his voice had authority.

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A little behind him, in front of the screen door that Grayber had jimmied, stood a man with sergeant's chevrons on his bulky blue uniform.

The man in the gabardine suit twisted the phone from Grayber's hand.

"Hey! What is this? I've got a right to phone in a story, haven't I? This thing is big."

"Maybe it's too big," said the sergeant.

Holding the phone in his left hand the man in the gray suit reached into his back pocket with his right hand and brought out a brown leather wallet. Turning his wrist he flipped the wallet open and held it about six inches from Grayber's nose.

Grayber read the card. The angry flush faded from his neck, and he looked at the man holding the wallet. He looked at the thick mustache on the sergeant's upper lip; he took in the dingy back room of the grocery store with the battered cartons of canned goods piled against the walls, the hole in the screen door, the gnats swarming around the uncovered light bulb. His glance came back to the face of the man in front of him.

"I've already spilled it," he said. "I told him about the kid."

"Tell him you made a mistake," said the man, flapping his wallet shut and putting it back in his pocket. "Tell him it's only a drunk, and that the police have him under control. Tell him anything."

Grayber nodded sadly. The brown hand shoved the phone at him. He took it, lifted it to his ear and said what he was told to say. An angry, high-pitched garble spurted from the receiver. A drop of sweat formed at Grayber's blond hair line, and he said: "All right. I'll call you back, all right." Then he slammed the phone into its cradle on the cigarette-burned table. The sergeant grinned.

Lighting a cigarette helped Grayber to recover some of his composure. "You fellows didn't waste any time. This deal just broke late this afternoon." He shook his head wonderingly.

"We could hold this bird for breaking and entering, Mr. Burton," said the sergeant, pointing at the screen door.

"How did you know I was in here?" Grayber asked, his voice puzzled.

The sergeant said: "Our headlights picked you up when you were standing outside the back door. You ain't a very good burglar. We

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parked down the street and came in the front way."

"I'm no burglar. I just wanted to use the phone. It's the only phone I could find. I thought all you cops were down there," Gerber said, jerking his head toward the window. Outside in the night the summer darkness was creased by the beams of spotlights spraying the hillside below the flat roofs of the apartments.

"Most of 'em are. I was bringing Mr. Burton through the road block."

Burton said: "Let me see your identification."

Grayber showed him a press card, blowing cigarette smoke at his head. Burton turned the card over, ignoring the smoke.

"*The Sun Telegraph*. Up in Pittsburgh, isn't it?"

"Yeah. The big city," said Grayber.

"I haven't time to check on you now." Burton tucked the card into the inside pocket of his coat." I don't have to explain anything to you, Grayber. But you'll tell me what you know. If there's a kid over there in a cave with an honest-to-god ray gun, some unknown weapon, you can understand why it's got to be kept quiet."

"I'd like to know how he got through our road-blocks. Nothing could get up the hill, or come down through the plateau either," the sergeant said.

Grayber chuckled, brushing at his trouser legs. "I came up through the woods."

Burton walked across the room, breaking the thin breeze that slid in through the screen door, drifted in the humid backroom and out the other door into the main store. Burton closed that door, and the room almost immediately became hotter.

"How much do you know, Grayber?"

"Not a hell of a lot, really. Nothing about the ray gun, or whatever it is. We got word that there was big trouble up here; but you should have heard some of the stories. They had everybody in that cave from an escaped prisoner from Western Pen to old ladies with machine-guns."

"But it isn't," Burton said. "It's a twelve-year-old boy with something that kills people."

The sergeant scratched his moustache. "It kills 'em, that's for sure. Not even a bruise on 'em, but they're dead as catfish on a mud bank."

Grayber blew smoke at his scuffed shoes. "He pointed

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the thing at them and they died. That's what the witnesses say. I talked to six or seven of the ones who saw it. Lots of witnesses, and they all said the same thing about the gun."

"And what was that?"

"Well, they said he always carried around this toy ray gun; you know, the kind kids play Buck Rogers with. That's what they say he used; that's what did it. These jerks were fighting each other to tell me about it. The stories checked with each other, too. It seems he killed two people, a boy of fifteen, and an older man, in his forties."

"You want me to call that city paper now and check on this guy?" the sergeant said to Burton.

"Later, Polshi. He's not that important. Not right now."

"Do you believe in ray guns, Grayber?" Burton said suddenly.

For the space of a moment Grayber's face went slack with surprise. Then he said: "Sure. I believe in ray guns, Captain Video and little green men from Venus. I also believe in elves, kobolds and vampires."

Burton studied Grayber. Expressionless, he turned and walked to the door that led to the main room of the store. "Let's go down there, Polshi. Grayber, you stay close to me. At my elbow."

Grayber's mouth opened, then abruptly closed. He dropped his cigarette to the floor and stamped on it. He followed Burton through the doorway. Sergeant Polshi took two steps after them, stopped, turned, went back and yanked at the cord that dangled from the light bulb. The room went dark. In the distance a police siren wailed, thin and urgent.

A half block below the one-story frame grocery store a black police cruiser stood at the curb. The yellow letters on its side read, "Reed Township Police Department." Polshi walked around the front of the car and got in behind the steering wheel. Burton got into the back seat and motioned Grayber in beside the sergeant.

Polshi started the motor and the car rolled down the hill, past the red brick, two-story apartment buildings of the housing project where lights flared in all the windows. At the bottom of the hill the car swerved with the bend in the street and went past more apartments. Carefully spaced young sycamores fronted the sidewalks down to

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a U-shaped building standing back from the street on a raised lawn that looked as smooth as a putting green. Three policemen were on the walk leading from the street to the building. One of them waved a flashlight at the cruiser and the sergeant pressed the horn twice. The cruiser passed the building, around a sharp curve to the left, down a street and around still another curve as the street spiraled down from the terraced hill. A valley lay between the hill they had traveled and a smaller one to their left, a long, sloping hill, day-bright in the brilliance of headlights and spotlight beams. It swept up a field of brush and tall grass to a talus slope that lay below a narrow cliff.

"There's the cave," said Polshi, pointing with his left hand.

"What's on the slope?" asked Grayber.

The cruiser slowed as Polshi turned his head. Despite the distance they saw that the body on the slope lay unnaturally still. They saw too the blue shirt and the darker blue trousers. "I think," said Grayber, "that the kid's killed a cop."

At the bottom of the hill Polshi pulled in behind a police sedan that blocked the road. He and Burton and Grayber got out of the car and began shoving through the spectators that milled on the road, in the field under the elms, and behind the police cruisers and sedans that were parked facing the hillside, their headlight beams slanting upward to the cave. The people shoved against the anxious-looking patrolmen who stalked up and down, waving them back. The crowd had a voice, a low mumble that drifted on the wind.

Polshi bulled his way through the restless crowd, elbowing aside a man in a sweaty undershirt, pressing a red-faced woman out of his way, Burton and Grayber close behind him.

"Hey! Here's more cops," yelled a long-haired boy with sideburns far down on his cheek. "Look out, cops! The kid's tough." Laughter, loud and jeering, followed the voice.

His lips tightened, but Polshi pushed forward, reaching the parked cars. A gray-haired man by the far sedan saw him and walked toward him rapidly, the gold bars on his shoulders sleek in the light.

"Jim," he said. "You

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should have been here. Maybe you could have stopped Davis. He tried to go up close and talk to the kid."

"You should have stopped him, Chief," said Polshi.

"Damn it, Jim. He went up there against orders. I can't be everywhere at once, man." The chief stood about two feet from the almost-solid shaft of a headlight beam and the glare of the light bounced from his shoulders, whitening his hair. It turned his face yellow and eyes pale. Burton walked up to him.

"This is Mr. Burton, Chief," said Polshi. "Chief Kennedy."

"I been waiting for you, Mr. Burton," said the chief, smiling and shaking Burton's hand briefly. "We got ourselves a real problem here. What are we supposed to do with a crazy twelve-year-old kid like this?"

Burton looked into the colorless eyes. "You're supposed to take him," he said, unsmiling. Then: "Did you see Davis die, Kennedy?"

"Did I? I ordered him not to go up there. When I saw what he was doing I hollered at him, but he kept on going. He got about ten feet from where he is now—Davis has four kids of his own, and he figured he could get across to this one—and the kid must've seen him. There wasn't a shot. Nothing. The kid just popped out of the cave and all at once Davis fell down, like he is now. No shot, no gun flash, nothing."

"You say you didn't see anything that looked like a flash, or a beam, perhaps?"

Chief Kennedy scratched his head slowly. "We have lots of light on that cave. If there was anything I know I didn't see it." Again Kennedy scratched his head, this time lifting his cap and reaching under the visor with his thumb. "Nobody else saw anything, either," he said.

Burton waved his hand impatiently. "Polshi told me you had tear gas here. How soon can you get ready with it?"

"Why, we're ready with it now, Mr. Burton. Yessir, we been ready with it. Who's this here?" Grayber had moved closer to the three men.

"Him? He says his name's Grayber. Keep an eye on him. He also says he's a reporter from Pittsburgh."

"Oh," said Kennedy, glaring suspiciously at Grayber.

Sergeant Polshi said: "We caught him in Dorsey's back room, trying to phone his paper."

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"Ha," said Kennedy, knowingly. The glare became a frown.

"It's a little too far to drop a gas shell from here," Burton said. He brushed by Kennedy and walked a few feet past the cars into the field.

He stared up at the talus, past the dead policeman whose blue uniform was pale gray in the sharp beams of light, up to the boulder-jagged ridge. Above the boulders a sandstone ledge lifted about twenty feet to the hill top. To the left of a tilted boulder, and at the base of the ledge, the headlights spattered whiteness around and into a small cave. It was black inside the cave with no movement there. Gray shadows loomed on the ledge wall. Above the hill top the sky curved, summer-pale, and a quarter moon was low in the east. The wind blew a mixture of dampness, the smell of mulberry blossoms and locust leaves. Burton studied the hill top, saw how it jutted sharply to the left and then down toward the macadam road.

"Hey, Chief! Lure him out with a couple of popsicles!" The laughter swelled again; the crowd scuffled and surged.

"Listen to those rats," said Grayber. He spat into the trampled weeds.

Burton turned his back on the hillside, then walked toward Kennedy. Three policemen were putting gray, rubbery gasmasks over their faces while two others stood by holding stubby tear gas guns.

"How much range does the boy have with that thing up there?" Burton asked.

"Huh? How the hell should I know?"

"There's no cover on that slope. Your boys will be sitting ducks once they're out in the open."

"I figured," said the chief slowly, wiping his right hand on his pant's leg. "I figured to black out all the lights except the one smack on the cave mouth."

"Even so, there's enough light from the moon and the project apartments for him to see by. When the lights go out he'll decide that something's wrong. He's a kid and he's frightened."

Polshi snorted. "I doubt that. So how would you do it?"

"Keep all the lights on. One man up on the hill top, where it curves out, just there, could drop a shell inside the cave mouth. One shell would be enough."

Turning, Kennedy scratched his neck to stare up at the

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hill top. "Yeah," he said. "You got something there, Mr. Burton. It'll take a good shot, though. The cliff juts out from the ledge a little too much."

"I'll do it," said Burton casually.

"You won't have to. Polshi is a dead shot. I'll send him. He moves quiet, too." He motioned to his sergeant. "How about it, Polshi?"

"Good deal. I'll go along the road under the trees and up through the woods."

"Sergeant," said Burton.

"Yeah?"

"Just the gas gun, Sergeant. I want the boy alive, and I want the weapon, whatever it is."

A woman's voice yowled above the mutter of the crowd, knife-sharp, cutting into the night noises. A scream, rasping, a cry of almost animal agony. It lifted to a whistling shrillness; it fell, moaning, and words came: "Joey! Joey! Oh, God, my Joey!"

The crowd went silent, listening to the scream echo among the trees and back from the hills. Some of the women in the crowd listened to the scream after it died away.

Grayber took out a book of matches, a cigarette held loosely between his lips. The cigarette trembled.

"Better keep her quiet, Kennedy," said Burton.

A mask in one hand, loaded gas gun in the other, Polshi approached Burton. "Hell, she'll tip off the kid," he said.

"You go ahead. We'll send a couple of men as decoys up the hill where the boy can't miss seeing them. They'll have orders not to fire."

"That should do it," Polshi grinned.

"It depends on you. Maybe between us we can outsmart a twelve-year-old kid."

Polshi laughed and walked casually away, along the edge of the crowd. Burton watched him until he reached the police sedan blocking the roadway, then went over to where Kennedy stood talking to the patrolmen in gas masks. Swiftly Burton gave orders. The group separated; Kennedy walked toward the crowd. Burton joined Grayber, and the three policemen started up through the grass of the hillside. Kennedy waved his arms at the spectators. "Back, everybody," he yelled. "Everybody get back!" The policemen in the cordon echoed him, down through the elm and locust trees. "Back! Everybody back!" The police-

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men shouted. The crowd drifted back, sullenly, then surged forward again.

Grotesque in their masks, the three patrolmen picked their way up the slope, as sharply defined under the spotlights and headlights as actors on a broad, tilted stage.

"Look out, Joey!" screamed the woman's voice from the crowd. Kennedy moved toward her.

"Look out!" called a mocking voice among the throng.

"Back! Get back!" the policemen down under the trees yelled. The grumbling of the crowd grew louder.

Grayber pressed his sweating palms against the hood of the police car, tingling to the coolness of the metal. "Listen to them," he said. "Listen. Animals."

Beside him, Burton saw the masked policemen reach the foot of the talus slope. They stepped gingerly onto the loose shale.

The headlights made Grayber's eyes blink; his ears rang with shouts from the crowd, the woman's voice shrilling, "Look out, Joey!" Heavy male voices took it up: "Look out, Joey! Look out!" A mosquito brushed close to Grayber's eye; he slapped at it and missed.

About three yards up on the talus slope the policemen stopped. On the top of the hill to the left above the cave, Polshi rose from behind a bush. Carefully he got down on hands and knees. When Grayber noticed him, Polshi was lying prone on the crest, sighting down the cliff face and in toward the cave mouth. The crowd saw him and a yowl swelled up past Grayber and Burton.

"If that was a grown man in there we'd be in trouble," Burton said, shaking his head. Up on the crest Polshi fired the gas gun.

There was a moment of silence, when everything and everybody was immobile, then clouds of thick white smoke shot up in front of the cave. A long sigh came from the crowd. The smoke puffed out and up; it clung to the boulders like sticky cotton and rolled along the ledge. It frothed from the cave mouth, tumbling as it spewed, and slid up the face of the cliff. Swiftly the three policemen dug their heels into the slope, and sliding and slipping, charged up over the ledge. The one who got there first plunged into the smoke followed by the second policeman. The third stumbled over a rock in the roiling smoke.

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Grayber held his breath, and waited. Finally, a small boy, bent double and staggering, weaved out through the smoke; he lurched into the policeman who had stumbled and the policeman seized his arm. Clumsily he dragged the coughing boy along the ledge and down onto the talus slope.

"The gun, does he have the gun?" Grayber said. "Maybe he dropped it!"

"I can't tell," said Burton. "Wait. There, he's holding something—it could be the pistol."

The two policemen who had reached the cave first appeared on the ledge, and went sliding down the slope after the one who was holding the boy. Down past the sprawled body of the dead man they came. The boy stumbled, and the people under the trees cried out in pity. Burton ran through the grass, Grayber behind him and Kennedy angled up to meet them. Burton got there first. The boy sat down, his arm still gripped by the policeman, his thin body twisting as he coughed and sobbed. Reaching down, Burton carefully disentangled the boy's fingers from the handle of a pistol. He looked at the weapon for a long moment, then turned it over.

It was made of red plastic, about nine inches long, and at the muzzle three thin plastic circles were joined to it, in some inimaginative designer's idea of a weapon of the future. Incongruously, it had a trigger and a trigger guard, like any ordinary toy pistol. Burton weighed it in his palm.

"Here, here, let me see it!" said Grayber.

"Hold on," Burton said, brushing Grayber's hand aside.

"Is it heavy? Let me feel it; let me see the damned thing."

Ramming the toy pistol into his coat pocket, Burton put a hand on Grayber's chest and shoved him away. Grayber lurched backward, then stopped and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "Sorry," he said. "I got carried away, I guess."

With a handkerchief held to his nose and mouth, Kennedy stooped beside the boy. "Easy, Joey. Easy. You'll be all right."

His head rolling on his neck, Joey coughed and wheezed. Uncut brown hair dangled across his wide forehead. His jaw was fully as wide; his face had a pressed together look from head to chin, with a wide nose as the result of the squeezing. Even

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his teeth were wide and thick. He wore a dirty, striped T-shirt and dirtier overalls.

"Kennedy," said Burton. The chief got to his feet. "Put a guard around the cave," Burton said.

Kennedy wiped his nose with his handkerchief and sneezed. "What for?"

"When the gas clears I'm going through that cave with a fine-tooth comb." Burton took the pistol from his pocket. "Look at this. A forty-nine-cent plastic toy. Do you think he killed three people with it?"

Slowly, Kennedy shook his head. "Nope, I guess not."

"The real weapon might still be in the cave. He's had enough time to hide it."

"That could be. Well, I'll get him to hell out of here."

"Wait a minute. I want the boy close by, to talk to him when I get back. How far is your headquarters?"

"Quite a ways down the hill. I'll take him up to the project administration building. I got some boys up there now."

"Good. I'll meet you there. And listen. Keep Grayber with you. Have a check made with that newspaper in Pittsburgh."

"Okay, I'll do that."

"Now, detail me a couple of your men with good eyesight."

"Yeah, okay. You got any ideas on how to handle the crowd too?" Sighing, Kennedy walked over to Joey. "Come on, Joey, we'll have the doc fix you up." He looked up the slope to where two policemen were bent over the sprawled body in the blue uniform. "The doc's been kind of waiting around here, Joey."

Not quite an hour later the doctor closed the door of the administration building, went by the policemen standing there, and down the steps. Inside the building in the director's office to the left of the entrance, Sergeant Polshi and Grayber sat under the indirect light from the high ceiling, watching the red-eyed boy hunched in a chair in front of a steel desk. Green filing cabinets filled one side of the room. Kennedy sat frowning behind the desk, to the right of a door, near the window. He leaned forward. "Now, Joey, this play gun you had with you, the one Mr. Burton has now, you say you shot the people with it. That's what you said, isn't it?"

Joey nodded his head, his shaggy, uncut hair flapping

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across his forehead. His wide face was tear-streaked and dirty. He rubbed his eyes and sniffed.

"Where'd you buy the gun, Joey?"

"I didn't buy it. I found it. I found it in the woods by the cave."

After taking a black leather tobacco pouch from his pocket and laying it on the desk, Kennedy fumbled in his vest pocket and brought out a round-boled pipe. Tapping the pipe-stem on the desk, he said: "You didn't know it was a gun that could kill people, when you found it, did you?"

Joey sucked air liquidly through his wide nostrils. "I didn't know it. I didn't want to kill anybody. Honest I didn't. I didn't know it."

Sergeant Polshi said: "He knew it could kill when he shot Davis, the little rat."

Kennedy's eyes went cold. "Now you shouldn't talk like that in front of him, Polshi. I'll ask him the questions." He tried to glare at Polshi, but Polshi snorted.

Joey hunched his shoulders closer to his neck, and pulled his neck farther down into his T-shirt.

"Tell me how it happened, Joey, how everything started. Take your time; nobody's going to hurt you." Kennedy scooped tobacco into the bowl of his pipe and mashed it down with a wide thumb. "For instance, when did you find this gun?"

"Long time ago," Joey said, looking sideways at Polshi. "Before vacation started."

"And this is August. Couple of months ago, then. You didn't shoot anybody with it all that time then?"

Joey shook his head and stared at the scraped floor.

"Nobody? In all that time? You didn't play with the gun?"

"Sure. I shot lots of kids. We play spacemen, and sometimes, cowboys, but mostly spacemen. I shot everybody with the blaster, but only in play. It wasn't for real. They weren't really shot. I was shot, too, lots of times."

An incredible cloud of blue smoke spewed from Kennedy's lips and shot past the stubby pipe. When it reached Joey he coughed. Grayber coughed too.

"Joey, do you remember the girl who died up here about two months ago? Named something - or - other Allen? Some kids found her on the steps leading down to the road. About thirteen years old, she was. Funny name,

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Darlene Allen, I think it was. Did you know what she died of, Joey? A heart attack, the coroner said." Kennedy shot a knowing look at Grayber. "You recall that, don't you. Made a big smell in the papers. They thought it was a rape murder at first."

"Did you know her, Joey? Do you remember how she died?"

The brown forelock waggled across Joey's face, brushing his wide nose. He kept his head down, shaking it again.

Grayber lit a cigarette, keeping his face expressionless. He said: "How did it feel, Joey, when you saw them die?" Joey turned his head first to the left, then to the right. He didn't look up.

Kennedy said: "Take this Brosko boy, now. The doctor said he died of a heart attack. You shot him, didn't you, Joey?" The hot, small room was quiet except for the hissing of tobacco smoke blown from Kennedy's lips. Footsteps clacked in the hall outside the door, and from the street, the subdued but still excited voices of the remnants of the crowd drifted in the windows.

"We were playing spacemen," Joey said abruptly. "A lot of us, over on the hill. Stush Brosko was always picking on me, and all the other little kids. He came over and tried to take my blaster away from me, so he could play. Stush never had no blaster. I wouldn't give it to him, and he started to beat me up. He made my nose bleed and hurt me bad in the belly. Bill Airheart made him stop, but when I was going home for supper Stush caught me. He started to hit me again and I shot him. He fell down."

"What happened after that, Joey?"

"I didn't know what to do. All of a sudden Mr. Perce came running out of the place across the street, hollering at me, and lots more people came into the street. I ran, and Mr. Perce chased me. He called me a murderer." Joey stopped and scratched an open sore on his forearm. "He caught me pretty easy, by the top of the steps. He shook me around, but I didn't let go the blaster. I kicked him and he pushed me off the steps into the weeds. He hurt me. He jumped down in the weeds and grabbed my arm, and then I blasted him, too. Then I ran for the cave. That's all."

"Then you got into the cave without any trouble?"

"Yeah. Those people who saw me shoot Mr. Perce, they

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chased me, but they didn't come too close."

"They were smart," said Polshi.

"All right," said Kennedy, laying his pipe on the desk top. "Now why did you shoot the policeman?"

"I was just scared, I guess. Mr. Perce said they were going to put me in the electric chair. I don't want to go to the electric chair. I won't go." He started to cry.

"I don't think you'll go to the electric chair, Joey," Kennedy said. He heaved himself out of the swivel chair, nodded to Grayber and started for the door. "Get our friend here a drink of water, Polshi."

Grayber followed him into the hall. Kennedy walked over to the red coke machine and put in a dime. "Well, Grayber, what do you think?" he asked as the machine clicked and buzzed.

Grayber snorted. "What do I think? I think I'm sitting on the story of the year and you won't let me near a telephone. I think you're foolish; it's bound to get out anyway."

"Now it ain't just me, son. Tell your troubles to Burton." Kennedy opened the bottle of coke. "He's acting for Uncle and I kind of let him take charge. I mean, what do you think of the kid's story?"

"I don't believe it, not a word. All kids are pretty good actors, you know that. This one is playing the sympathy act to the hilt."

"You get a look at the gun?" asked Kennedy, smacking his lips and lowering the coke bottle.

"Not much of a look, but enough to see that it was a damned toy. People don't die when they're shot with a toy."

"Well, it looked like a toy to me, too. Sure, it's impossible, but if Burton don't find anything in the cave the only thing we can figure is that the gun did kill those people." He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. "Nothing like this ever happened in all the time I been a policeman," he said, wonderingly, shaking his head.

"Chief, did you think it might have been the gun? What I mean is this; it looks like a toy, right? What you and I have seen of it so far, that is. Toys don't kill people, but—" Grayber held up his left hand, fingers extended, and tapped his thumb with the forefinger of his right hand. "But we haven't looked inside the gun yet. It might have been changed, fixed, made

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into a death weapon that only externally looks like a toy."

Coke sloshed in the bottle as Kennedy shook it in a circle. "Hey. That could be you know. I never thought of that. You think Joey could have done that?"

"Not Joey, maybe. But somebody else might have."

"Come to think of it now, Joey's an odd one. Don't say anything in front of him, but I heard around that the other kids don't like to play with him; they call him 'Goofy Joe,' and things like that. They say he talks wild, and does funny things." Kennedy tilted the bottle against his lips, but kept his eyes on Grayber. "I'll tell you something. I got the chills when I touched him out there. He's no normal kid, not by a long shot."

A door at the opposite end of the corridor opened and a policeman came out of the men's room, hitching at his belt. He nodded to Kennedy as he came abreast of them and turned out through the front door of the building.

"What about Joey's old man?" asked Grayber, studying the door to the men's room. At the opposite end of the wing it faced the rear of the Administration building.

"Joey's got no old man. Projects like this one are full of grass widows, and women like Joey's mother, whose old man ran off and left them with a kid or two and no support. The way Joey's Ma tells me, it's a small loss. The old man got banged up in an accident almost two years before Joey was born, and he was never the same after that. Affected his head, I guess. When Joey was still a baby the old man up and took off, and she never heard from him. You know how those things go."

"What kind of an accident was it?"

Kennedy finished the coke and clanked the bottle into the rack against the wall by the machine. "Well, the old man was a flunky in a laboratory up in Oakland at one of the Universities, where they were doing some research on physics or something. He was in there when an explosion let loose one day and killed three-four of the boys and knocked him cold. They kept him under observation a long time, because he lay there exposed to some radiation, or something like that."

Grayber snapped his fingers and grinned. "Hell, that's it. Listen, you and I together can crack this wide open!"

"How?" Kennedy blinked

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mildly. "What do you mean that's it?"

"Mutation, Chief. Mutation. Did you ever hear of mutation?"

"Some, but I never took any stock in it. You think Joey was affected by what happened to his old man?"

"Chief, I'll tell you just what I think. It's possible that we've got the answer in that explosion. This kid might be a genius. It sounds crazy, but it could be."

"The hell you say," said Kennedy, but he listened.

There were only two police cars in front of the Administration building when Burton came back, and nobody on the sidewalk except a group of teen-age boys in Levis and gaudy sport shirts who stood or sat under the street light on the curb across the street. Many of the apartment windows were dark, and the night wind blew down the hillside. A too cheerful voice, a television speaker, blared from an apartment, and a cricket snapped derisively from the sycamores. The moon was a quarter full, but it whitened the lumpy trees on the hills. In front of the door a lone policeman stared up at it. The police car stopped at the curb. Burton got out, slammed the door, and walked slowly up to the building, scuffing his shoes on the cement walk.

Inside the office Joey still sat, with Chief Kennedy talking softly to him when Burton slammed through the door, his hair mussed, dirt stains on the knees of his gabardine trousers. His hands were grimy and the sleeves of his coat were pushed back past his elbows. He took in the room.

"Where's the sergeant?" His voice was edgy.

"I sent him and most of the boys back down to headquarters. We got other calls to handle, you know. Everything doesn't stop just for one case, Mr. Burton. You've been gone a long time, too."

"Grayber? Did the sergeant take him along?"

"Huh-uh. He's out in the john. I thought you wanted him to stay here."

"I wanted him under guard at all times, Kennedy. I told you that."

"Well, hell, man, there's no harm in him going to the can, is there? I got men out front." Burton dropped his arms to his sides in despair, and started toward the door.

"Hey! What did you find up in the cave?"

Turning, his hand on the door knob, Burton said: "Nothing, absolutely noth-

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ing." The door banged shut behind him.

"I knew he wouldn't find anything," Kennedy said. "You did too, didn't you, Joey?"

The boy's face looked tired; there were blue rims under his eyes and at the edges of his lips. "I told you I didn't hide nothing up there. I never had nothing but the blaster."

Smoothing the folds of his shirt over his big stomach, Kennedy smiled. "That's what I figured all along. These government men aren't always as smart as they make out to be."

The phone rang and Kennedy picked it up. "Kennedy. Yeah. Okay. Well, that's something anyway. Yeah. Mr. Big is back; we'll be down inside of twenty minutes I figure." His voice droned in the shabby room. Joey pressed his neck against the back of the chair and looked up at the window behind Kennedy where the heavy screen vibrated to the attack of the night bugs. He could see the pale sky and the tops of the sycamores. Kennedy laughed. The bugs whanged against the window screen, and Joey heard voices of the policemen outside on the steps of the building.

The office door squeaked open. Grayber slowly stepped over the threshold and closed the door. In his right hand he dangled the toy pistol. He was breathing heavily. Leaning against the door he rubbed his left hand against his cheek. Kennedy saw him and nodded, then he spoke abruptly into the mouthpiece and hung up.

"Where's Burton?" he asked, smiling, his hand still on the telephone.

Slowly Grayber lifted the pistol and pointed it at Kennedy. "In the john, where I left him, nice and quiet and no trouble."

"Now what the hell does that mean?" Kennedy said, putting both hands on the desk top, and hunching his shoulders.

"You ever have any trouble with your heart, Chief?" Grayber said, accenting the last word. Shoving himself away from the door he took three steps and leaned over the desk, holding the toy gun level with Kennedy's eyes. "This is what you're going to do, Chief. Go to the door and call your men in from outside. Tell them to get down the hill to headquarters; that you and Burton and the kid will be down shortly in your car. I'll be behind you with this excellent weapon. First, hand over

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your pistol. The one with the bullets, you know."

Sinking back in the chair Kennedy pulled out his .38 from the worn holster on his right hip.

"Butt first."

Kennedy turned it in his hand and gave it to Grayber, without looking at it. He stared at the red plastic pistol like a man looking into a bottomless pit.

Grayber took the .38 by the handle, and shoved it into his belt. He pulled his coat tight; stepping back he nodded at the door. Heavily, Kennedy got up. He opened the door and shouted: "Smitty!"

The door at the building's entrance opened and the policeman came in. Almost word for word Kennedy repeated what Grayber had told him to say. The policeman hardly noticed Grayber, standing behind Kennedy with the toy gun held lightly in his hand, but stared at Joey shrunk miserably in the chair, all the while Kennedy spoke. Then he turned and went through the door. "It's about time," he said loudly, as the door swung shut.

Grayber motioned Kennedy back inside the room, then locked the door. Kennedy sat down in the chair behind the desk again. They waited for what seemed to Joey, sitting open-mouthed now and white faced, a long time. Motors roared outside, then died away in the night. Now there were only the crickets in the sycamore and faint voices down the street.

Taking a deep breath, Grayber grinned at Joey. "Now we'll ride out of here in style, kid, in the chief's own car." The toy pistol swerved to Kennedy again. "You got a penknife, Chief?"

In disbelief Kennedy stared at him, then shook his head.

"I got one," said Joey, fishing in the back pocket of his dirty trousers.

"Fine. Letsee. Uh-huh. A ragged blade but a good point." The .38 gleamed as Grayber laid it on the desk, the muzzle toward the chief. Swinging his left hip up on the desk, Grayber began to pry at the plastic toy with the penknife, while Joey watched closely. Conversationally, Grayber said: "These toys are made in two separate parts, joined together in the finished product. A little digging along the line of joining and we have the gun apart." He scraped the knife blade at the handle of the toy.

"Chief, you're a stupid guy. You bungled this whole deal. You don't know what to

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do with your cops, you goofed at every turn. That's what makes it easy, for our side, Chief, the great American talent for goofing."

For a second he looked up from the knife-work and grinned at Kennedy. "You swallowed that stuff I handed you about Joey fixing the gun, didn't you? Did you fix this gun, Joey? Are you a mutated genius?"

"I didn't do nothing to that blaster. I already told everybody six times. I didn't do a thing to it. And I ain't no mutater, neither."

"Of course you're not. Oh, there's something in the toy, Chief, but Joey didn't put it there. Burton knows that, or suspected it. He was too thorough, that was his trouble. No stone unturned, and all that. But he probably would have taken this toy apart after he was satisfied that what he was after wasn't hidden in the cave."

There was a sharp, spine-grating signal as Grayber forced the knife blade between the opening he had dug in the plastic handle of the pistol.

"You see, Chief, there actually are weapons that kill and leave no mark. Just a few of them here in the States because only about eight of our agents are big enough wheels to be trusted with them. Little things, like fountain pens, and sometimes they've been concealed in real guns, like this." He tapped the .38. "So, its conceivable that one of the big fellows hid one in this toy. And Joey got hold of it somehow. That's why Burton was here, Chief. You don't think the FBI would be interested in a small town fracas do you? Burton knew, and I knew."

"You're no damned newspaper man," Kennedy said.

Laughing, Grayber tossed the knife onto the desk and put the opened end of the plastic gun handle against the edge of the desk and pulled. The plastic ripped apart with a sound like torn sandpaper. He held the pieces of the gun in front of him. He stopped laughing. The two sections of the gun lay open in his hands, each empty, like the scraped shells of two deformed lobsters.

"I told you I didn't put nothing in there," Joey said, after a long while.

With a curse Grayber flung the pieces of plastic to the floor. He picked up the .38, reversed it, held it like a club by the barrel. Joey cringed in the chair as Grayber took one step toward him.

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"You little idiot. What did you do with it?"

"Now look here; you leave the boy alone, damn it!" Kennedy was on his feet behind the desk, his arms swinging up. Grayber spun around to the side of the desk and whipped the .38 down. The butt caught Kennedy's forearm; he grunted and bent forward. The butt slashed across his cheekbone, and Kennedy staggered sideways. Grayber lashed the gun butt down upon Kennedy's head, and he collapsed across the green blotter on the desk, his cap rolling to the floor. Grayber swung again at the gray head. The butt thumped loud in the small room.

Grayber, his face twisted, raised the .38 again, then dropped his arm to his side. He took in lungfulls of stale air, and turned toward Joey.

"Is he dead?" asked Joey, standing in front of the chair. "Did you kill him?"

"I hope to hell I did."

"Boy, did you hit him! There's blood on his face! Let me see! Let me see!"

Breathing through his nose again, Grayber lifted the .38 slowly and with difficulty he said: "Now look, Joey. You and I can still get out of here in his car. Both of us. They'll never lock you up then and you won't go to the electric chair. All you have to do is tell me what you did with it."

"They won't put me in no electric chair. Not me."

"What did you do with it, Joey?"

"I told you and I told them, I didn't do nothing to it, nothing. I didn't put nothing in it.

"Joey, Kennedy's dead. I can hit you with this gun like I hit him, Joey. In the face, until you tell me what you did with cylinder-ray."

"Don't hit me, mister. I don't know about no rays, mister."

"The cylinder, Joey. You killed four people with it. Where is it? Where?"

Drops of sweat ran down Joey's forehead, dripped from his wide, short nostrils, to his quivering chin. His face was greasy with sweat.

"They'll burn you in the chair, Joey, unless we get out of here. Unless you tell me."

"They won't! They won't do nothing to me!" Joey's thin voice rose, and his eyes began to shine. "I won't let them! I can do lots of things, not just kill people!"

In one sudden move Grayber flung out and clutched Joey's hair with his left hand. Stepping close, he twisted

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Joey's head back and lifted the .38 butt.

Joey's eyes blazed up at him. Joey shook in an ecstasy of tremblings and his eyes went wider.

"Damn you," said Grayber, between his teeth, and he swung the butt down. It caught Joey in the mouth with just the force Grayber wanted. Joey sagged, then his knees straightened.

"Don't!" cried Joey. "I'll tell you, don't!"

Grayber's fingers twisted and flung Joey's head up, hurling him two feet backward. Again Grayber raised the .38.

Then Joey crouched; his eyes changed color. He pointed his right hand at Grayber, forefinger out, thumb uplifted, the other three fingers curled as if around an imaginary pistol.

"Zap!" hissed Joey. "Zap! Zap!"

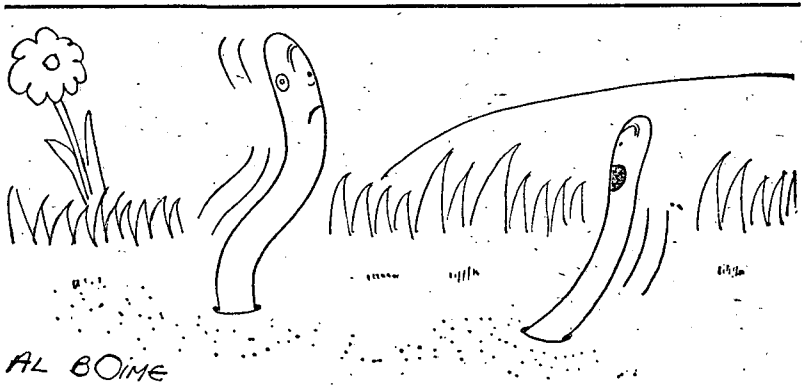
Grayber tensed, his heels digging at the floor and the .38 dropped from his hand. It was then that he realized that in a way he had been right, that he had, without knowing it, brushed the edge of the truth. It was then that he knew what Joey was.

He staggered, his eyes on Joey's, terribly. He fell heavily to his knees, his teeth clenched. He lunged face down, his right arm stretched out on the dirty wood floor.

Joey crouched there, his lips moving, then his eyes gradually lost their flickering shine; he straightened, and loosened his fingers. He looked down at Grayber.

"They won't do nothing to me, mister," he whispered. "I told you they won't do nothing to me."

THE END



"Don't tell me your troubles! I'm your other end!"

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The Day After ETERNITY

By LAWRENCE CHANDLER

It's tough enough to repel any invader from space—but when you come up against an invisible threat that uses the Gay 90's as a weapon—brother, you are *in trouble!*

I SAID, "Colonel Pagan reporting to General Avers."

The sprite behind the desk said, "Oh, yes, Colonel. The general is expecting you." She had a way of making you feel you were the biggest thing so far—that the day wouldn't have been complete without you. She had jet-black hair. She was wearing one of those new sprayed-on blouses that revealed every pore and she had the eyes of a blue Martian sand cat. One look and I knew Sam Avers hadn't turned senile yet.

The sprite pointed to the door that read, *Samuel B. Avers—Commanding Officer—First Alliance District,* and said, "You may go right in, Colonel."

Sam was on video with some fat civilian, so I came to attention and waited. The civilian studied me through narrowed, thoughtful eyes and asked, "Is this the man, General?"

Sam turned and looked at me coldly and said yes.

"Hmmm. Looks competent."

"Colonel Joe Pagan; A. T., A. C., A. S. A., among other branches," Sam said.

"Career man?"

"From way back."

The fat civ was looking at my skull, where the hair had grown in white. "Where did you acquire the gash, Colonel?"

He must have been important, so I played it stiff. Instead of telling him it was none of his goddam business, I said, "Advance Recon, sir. Third Neptunian Expedition.

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"Now look," he said firmly. "Either you're lying or I'm crazy!"

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A whirly on Gannymede got in a claw."

"Oh, yes. The Expedition that finally succeeded in liberating the Neptunians. Noble effort."

I didn't laugh because that wasn't my job. They didn't pay me for laughing in the faces of important civs. He smiled and said, "Fine allies, the Neptunians. They'll come in handy." Then he turned his face to Sam and said, "We're depending on you, General. Give us a report as soon as possible." He faded out and Sam snapped off the screen. Sam came around on his swivel couch and I saluted. "Colonel Pagan reporting, sir."

Sam passed a tired hand over his forehead and said, "Oh, cut out the crap and come over and sit down."

I went over and sat down and we looked each other over. I said, "You've got yourself a belly."

He looked down and then back at me and growled. "You're no Venusian god yourself."

"Your office sprite was impressed."

"She goes for anything in a uniform."

"I'll check on the way out."

His grin highlighted the weariness in his face; a face that had aged quite a lot since we'd fought together in the Lunar caves. I counted the years and realized I was thirty-five years old. Not so good. Years sliding by too fast. Then I looked at Sam. He wasn't any older, but he would have passed for fifty. Riding a high orbit in the Alliance aged a man. I didn't envy him.

He snapped the scramble key on his desk, making the room peek-proof, and said, "I've got a bad one for you, Joe."

"I've had bad ones before."

"Nothing like this, though."

I waited while he looked over some notes on his desk. After a while, he scowled and said, "Have you heard about the snooper?"

"Vaguely."

"It moved into the System a month ago."

"I heard that. They said it took an orbit between Terra and Mars."

"Right. And thereby hangs the grief."

I didn't get it. I said, "Why grief? Snoopers have dropped in on us before." They were jet-controlled planets whose suns had given out. They'd come by and spot our System and move in to borrow a little solar heat. After a few years they'd go on about their busi-

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ness and no one the worse. We had plenty of solar heat.

"I know," Sam said. "They drop in to warm their feet at our fire and then run along. But this one is different."

"How so?"

"These boys want to drink out of our fountain."

"I don't meet you."

He looked at me across the bags under his eyes and said, "Joe, what keeps us alive and functioning on this planet?"

"Any number of things. Freak coincidences, mostly. A paper-thin layer of atmosphere—"

"Water, Joe. That's the basic."

"Right. But I don't quite know what you mean by basic. It can be created. They do it on Mars."

"They do it—but we can't—not if we were suddenly stripped of our supply."

"Why not?"

"Because the situation is entirely different. The Martians had two-thousand years to get ready for complete drought. They knew it was coming. Their tables of water-vapor escape told them the exact time they'd have to start shifting for themselves. They had all those years and even then, they almost missed. How long do you think it takes to lay out globular canals—set atomic cores—build synthesis tanks as big as oceans two miles under a planet's surface?"

"I get your point. If all our water-vapor suddenly jumped out into space, we'd be in trouble. . . ."

"We'd be all through, Joe."

"But what's that got to do with the snooper?"

"This one doesn't seem to need heat. It wants water. And it's drawing off our water supply so fast we'll be bone-dry in twenty years if it continues."

"There still seems to be an answer. Ask the boys, nice, to go away. If they refuse, go out and blow them into dust. I understand the planet only got a three thousand-mile diameter."

"We don't dare, Joe. We got a spectrum analysis that would knock your hat off. The whole core's alive. A blast big enough to do any good would nova that snooper all over the System. It could trigger the sun."

I rubbed my chin and realized I'd forgotten to shave. And calling on a big man, too. "Sounds impossible."

Sam was staring at me oddly. "And maybe it is. In fact, Joe, the snooper may not even be there."

I stared back. "Now wait

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a minute, Sam. You just said—"

"Let me give you the whole picture. We only know one thing for sure—we're losing our water vapor. We started losing it when the snooper arrived, so it's logical to say the thing's responsible, but get this: That hot spectrum is only one of seven different ones we scanned."

"But spectrums can't vary, man! Not when—"

"That snoopers got us talking to ourselves, Joe. Microphotos snapped on an identical surface show any number of different landscapes and developments. In twenty-five minutes we photographed a jungle, a city, a desert, and a mountain ridge within the same five-mile diameter."

"The planet's alive with mirages."

Sam got up and walked around the table. "Or maybe we've got fly specks on our lenses. But Intelligence doesn't seem to think so, and they call the orbit in a situation like this."

"What do they say?"

"They think," Sam returned, slowly, "that we're up against a formless entity—a mind-force existing in a frequency our eyes and instruments detect."

If he'd figured on flattening me, he'd failed. I'd read Intelligence reports proving that such entities existed. The hypothesis and proof had been theoretical, however, so the whole thing had been rather sketchy. I said, "But what would a bodyless entity need of a planet?"

"We don't know, but it's quite indicative that they do need water-vapor."

He had me there. "But—"

"I can't answer your questions, Joe, because we haven't got any answers. All we've got is this—Intelligence is sure the snooper actually exists—that it's solid matter. They've huddled with the bio-chemists and physicists and mathematical theorists and constructed a problem they threw at the robot calculators at Harvard University. The answer, they claim, gave them the location of" —Sam stopped and peered at the notes he held in his hand. "—of the *nuclear ganglia* of the entity."

"And what in the hell might that be?"

"So far as we're concerned, Joe, it's the spot on the snooper they want blown up."

"And who does the blowing?"

"You."

I got up and took a turn around the table myself. "Fine. All they ask a man to

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do is land on a planet that may not even exist and knock off an entity that's probably not even there, just so they can keep on taking baths every Saturday night."

"So we can all keep on living, Joe."

Sam Avers spoke quietly as he went back and sat down.

"Okay—when do I start?"

"Blast-off is set for Friday night."

"What's the makeup?"

"We're giving you seventy-five men, and it's an Alliance-project."

"Good Lord! That means Venusians — Martians — Mercurians — I thought you said *men.*"

Sam spoke quietly again. "Anyone who fights and dies for a common and vital cause is a man, Joe. You can pick four Terrans of your choice. And another thing—there'll be a girl."

"What?"

"A girl from Intelligence—a psychologist named Diana Abbot. She's coming in from Washington this afternoon. In the meantime, you'd better pick your Terrans and get your space check."

"I'll get right at it."

"Another thing—let me have the names of the four men you want. Get it to me as soon as you round them up."

Sam Avers sat down at his table. His change of expression told me the informality was over. He snapped off the scrambler and I got up and snapped to attention. "Assignment accepted, sir."

"Thank you, Colonel Pagan."

I saluted and started to exit. At the door I turned. "Sir, may I inquire as to the name of the civilian who was on your screen when I came in?"

"Certainly. That was Gregory Winthrop, Chairman of the Interplanetary Relations Board. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing important. I recognized the face but couldn't place it."

"Good luck, Colonel."

I went into the outer office. The sprite was not at her desk. She was in the far corner by the washstand slipping something into her bag. I got a flash of it. Bright, shiny, circular. She turned as though frightened, then regained her poise. She said, "You startled me," then walked back to her desk with the sinuous movement of a leopardess on the make.

I went to the door and opened it and then turned. "What's your name, dear?"

"Bettina Turner, sir."

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"Thank you, dear." I went to the nearest bar and downed a double brandy. It was very good and I had another one. Then I began wondering about things. I wondered about that damned snooper that could change its surface at the flash of a micro-camera. I wondered whether or not that Harvard robot had slipped a cog or two. I wondered what sexy little Bettina Turner was doing with a scrambler-decoder and why she'd looked so guilty when caught putting it in her purse. I ordered another brandy and wondered if leopardesses ever actually went on the make.

I made out my list at the bar—Hap Hannigan, Jimmy Coslow, Nick Wynn, Art Bolton—then used the bar phone to contact them. Hap and Jimmy weren't hard to locate. They were top sergeants in the Minneapolis Alliance Barracks. I called the C. O., used Sam Aver's name, and left an order to send them to my office.

Nick Wynn and Art Bolton were a little tougher to locate. Nick had resigned from the service after we finished the Venusian campaign together. His father was a billionaire and had a private museum of old automobiles with ten fortunes tied up in it. He possessed the only genuine Model-T Ford in existence—all the others having been demolished when the bombs of the 1998 uprising hit the museums along with every place else.

I figured he'd be in New York puttering around the museum, and I was right. I got him on the phone and he said he'd be in Minneapolis in an hour.

They traced Art Bolton for me to a New Orleans bar. He'd been out of service six months and probably hadn't drawn a sober breath in that time. But he could sober up quick on demand and promised to say good-bye to his women and head north immediately. I called a messenger from the Barracks and sent the list to Sam Aver's office. Then I ordered another brandy.

I'd hardly set the glass down when she came in. A tall, blonde girl with nice legs and a cold, beautiful, patrician profile, who evidently thought breasts were functional because she kept hers covered up.

She sat down beside me at the bar and ordered a stinger. I looked at her and smiled and said, "Have it on me?"

She looked back and didn't

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smile and said, "Certainly, sucker."

I blinked. "Beg pardon?"

"It won't get you a thing."

"Did I ask?"

"Practically. You visualized a small room with green drapes to which you obviously have access. It contains a couch, a liquor cabinet, and a file of music tapes."

I'd had enough brandy to take the edge off my politness. "Huh! A telepath and a snob."

"Telepath—yes—but why the snob?"

"A cold—in fact a frigid snob."

"Cold — perhaps — frigid — possibly, under most circumstances — but I repeat, why snob?"

"No other type parades its talents in bars."

She thought that over soberly. "You seem to be parading yours quite openly."

"I'm a citizen having a few drinks. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. Is your offer withdrawn?"

"Hell no. I'm a sucker. I'll buy anybody a drink."

Her tone had been such that I figured I'd put her in her place and she was sorry. I waited while she selected words of apology. She said, "So you're the drunken sot upon whom the fate of Terra rests."

I got red in the face and choked up the way I do when I get mad suddenly. She looked me over clinically and said, "I'm Diana Abbot. I think Commander Avers mentioned my name to you."

I got my tongue unstuck. "Well for crisake! Why pick me out in a bar? Couldn't you have made contact at my office the way any normal person would?"

She continued to look me over, completely poised and self-possessed. "I'm a psychologist. That makes me abnormal, I suppose. At any rate, I like to study the animal in its natural habitat. There is more to be learned that way."

"In other words, you like to sneak up on people."

Her stinger came and she lifted it to her lips. Then she set it down, flushed slightly, and frowned at me. Her eyes flicked downward for a second and she said, "For heavens sake! Quit worrying about them. The fact that I cover them indicates neither frigidity nor abnormality. I just happen to be old-fashioned enough to think you're more attractive this way than pushed brazenly out for all the world to see."

I'd gotten under her skin by just thinking. I grinned.

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"Okay—they're yours to do with as you will. Shall we start over and try to be friends?"

"I think that would be a good idea."

"Fine. We're going out into space on a dangerous mission. We've got to keep our minds on business."

"That's right."

"So we'll leave sex completely out of it."

She set down her glass and gave me a long, peculiar, penetrating look. "That's what you think," she said, looking very solemn.

As I walked down the hall toward my office, the thundering voices of a quartette came louder and louder:

Oh, the fighting men of Venus
Respond when duty calls.
Their guts are lined with
copper,
They've got lava rocks
for—

I put my key in the lock.

Oh, we'll drive the last
battalion
Across the last terrain.
And on the day after eternity,
We'll plan the last campaign.

They were there—all four of them—and they'd already found the liquor. Hap Hannigan and Jimmy Coslow were sprawled on the lounge Diana Abbot had spotted in my lecherous mind, and Nick Wynn was pushing back the green drapes to let some of the alcohol fumes out.

Oh, those four-armed, fighting
Martians
Can take a star apart.
They'll leave a hole from pole
to pole
That isn't worth a—

Art Bolton looked over and saw me and yelled, "Joe Pagan!" and it was a little rough for a few minutes. Then I got them quieted down and looked them over. None of them had changed much. A little older. Nick's temples were gray and Art Bolton's jaw-line had blurred a little from heavy drinking. Hap and Jimmy were still in shape of course. Four good men. I'd fought with them from Mercury to Pluto and knew they could be depended on.

I looked at Nick and Art. "You two want to sign on again?"

They pointed at each other and spoke the same words in unison. "Me sign up and carry that slob through a campaign?"

I said, "Okay—it's settled."

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Art Bolten said, "Like hell it is! What's the orbit?"

"Expedition to the snooper."

"That's different. I've never been on a snooper before."

"You'll like this one. Hot women—cold beer. Now get over to H. Q. and sign up. Then the four of you get your space checks tomorrow morning and stand by at the barracks for a call."

Hap Hannigan said, "I been under wraps for six months. We'll have a little drinkee first. You join us, Joe?"

"Can't do. But see you get into a Turkish bath early enough to steam the alcohol out before the space check."

They headed out and I heard a last verse as they waited for the elevator:

Oh, the soldier boys of Pluto,
Have never lost a fight.
Their sons are born in iron pants
And their women scratch and bite.

Oh, we'll drive the last battalion,
Across the last—

I slammed the door and lay down to get some sleep. After a while, the phone rang. I struggled back to consciousness and reached for it. "Hello."

"This is Diana Abbot. Did I wake you up?"

"Yes."

"That's too bad," she said happily. "I was just going to bed myself, so naturally, I thought of you. Then I remembered I hadn't thanked you for the drink, so of course I had to call."

I ground my teeth. "Can you pull images over a phone?"

"No."

"Too bad. I wish you could see what I'm thinking." I slammed up the phone and went back to sleep. It took an hour.

I reported to Central Medic the next morning. A young doctor looked at my identification tag and told his nurse, "Bring the *dossier* on Joseph R. Pagan, Colonel, Alliance Space Arm."

We waited and she returned a few moments later. She was a blonde young sprite and the puzzled look became her. "It's incomplete, Doctor. The psychology file is no longer in the file."

He was young too, and frowned importantly. "Who's got it?"

"I don't know."

"Very well. Get the micro

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on it from the master cabinet."

While we waited again, I asked, "Who would have access to my psycho file?"

"Oh, any number of people."

"That covers a lot of territory."

He thought I was needling him and tightened his scowl. "Your military superiors. The people in the high political echelons. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. I was just making conversation."

The sprite brought the master micro and we got to work. I went through the routine and passed with only one dial against me. It was on the machine that peeked into your bloodstream and tattled if it found any alcohol.

"Not enough to stop you," the young doctor said regretfully, "but don't drink any more until you blast off."

I hoped my quartette had gotten to the baths early.

On the way out, I met Diana Abbot going into the physical examination room wrapped in a sheet. She said, "Good morning, Colonel, did you pass?"

"Handily." I opened the door. "Want me to go along and keep you company?"

"No, thanks."

I smiled and held out my hand. "Well, see you at the barracks."

She extended her own hand and shook mine. She said, "You hoped I'd reach out without thinking and drop the sheet. That's not very gentlemanly."

"It would have been fun, though. So long."

That afternoon, I made a final check with Sam Avers, got my official orders, and reported to the field two hours before blast-off. My force was waiting, under the command of a bright young lieutenant with shiny insignia. He turned it over to me and marched smartly away. A weird lot they were too. Any Alliance expedition looks more like a traveling carnival than a military unit.

They'd given me twenty-five Martians. Evil-faced devils. Leather-skinned, four-armed fighters. The best in the System. All the Martian soldiers had been rented into the Alliance by the Martian *Kastron,* a fine ally so long as he got his. He talked solidarity, got so much a head, guaranteed obedience, and liked to see them get killed because then he got a close-out fee. The fear and devotion with which these demons regarded the fat, grub-like little slob

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had always been a mystery to me. They were killed for the slightest disobediance, the *Kastron* doing the job himself with a golden meat axe, and execution by this god of theirs was the only thing in heaven or hell that they feared.

There were twenty winged Ganymedians bouncing around and chirping like birds, nothing at all warlike about them except the glittering stingers protruding from the lower parts of their harnesses. One touch of the business end of a stinger meant instant and painless death.

The fifteen Venusians assigned to the company stood as straight as ramrods, eyes straight ahead. They considered themselves the aristocrats of the System. They considered themselves handsome, too, and every man carried a mirror in his knapsack. A pelt of soft blue fur served a Venusian for clothing and their yellow cat-eyes seemed to penetrate like spears. They were vicious, treacherous, and poor soldiers.

There were also ten exoskeletal Plutonians. These lads were ponderous and slow-moving, but you could use them for battering rams in a pinch, because nothing less than a rock crusher would break a Plutonian hardhead's skull.

The company was rounded out with five Mercurians that should have been listed as hospital supplies rather than soldiers. They weren't fighters and didn't claim to be, but they were full of a sweet green elixir that had saved many a soldier's life. They were used only for transfusions—walking blood banks.

The four Terrans were waiting nearby for orders. I called them over. They saluted. I said, "Sergeant Hannigan—You're in command of the Martians. Sergeant Coslow, take the Ganymedian contingent—and get those two down off the barracks roof. You're in command of the rest of the company, Captain Bolton. Lieutenant Wynn—liaison. Any questions?"

There were no questions, so I had the company marched to the landing pits to await boarding.

As they marched away, a voice asked, "Any orders for me, Colonel?"

I turned and saw Diana Abbot garbed in skin tight clothing, ready for blast-off. I said, "You're a civilian. Other than in emergencies, you're not under my command."

"I'll take orders, however,"

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she said quietly. "So long as I agree that they are wise ones."

"Very decent of you," I said. "I'd suggest you prepare to board." I walked away resolving to have no trouble with Diana Abbot. So our first brush came ten minutes later when I was checking supplies and came on two crates that didn't add up. "What do these boxes contain?"

Diana was right at my elbow. "I ordered them, Colonel. I obtained a priority from Commander Avers."

"What's in them?"

"Helmets."

"For the company?"

"Who else?"

"Since when are you consigning battle equipment to my troops?"

"These helmets aren't exactly battle equipment. They'd hardly stop gunfire. They're made of lead."

I could feel my face getting red. "Now what in the name of Pluto do we want of lead helmets?"

"They may come in handy."

I turned to the loaders. "Shunt those two boxes aside."

Diana held up a paper. "Priority, Colonel."

"This is my expedition. I'm in command."

"That's stupid. Commander Avers can send you after a pack of cigarettes."

I felt like slugging her. "Load the boxes," I said, and walked away fast.

We'd been out four hours before I saw Diana again. I was checking combat material in my cabin when she knocked on the door.

I let her in and she said, "I want to apologize."

"For what?"

"I'm sorry I had to throw weight around in the matter of the helmets."

"You got them aboard, didn't you?"

She came over and laid a hand on my arm. It was a nice hand; much nicer than the requisition for twenty-five ice-ray guns I'd been checking. She leaned forward with a serious look on her pretty face and said, "Joe, you and I mustn't fight. This job is too important. There must be no friction between us. Will you believe me when I tell you those lead helmets may save this expedition?"

"Possibly—if you told me why." Her face was close and I got the feeling her lips invited. I got up and walked away.

Diana took a cigarette from my desk. I stood where I was and made her light it herself.

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I think my boorish reactions stemmed for the feeling that she had more brains and more ability in her line than I had in mine. That annoyed me. Diana Abbot was too pretty to be smart. I'd always felt ill-at-ease with smart, beautiful women.

Diana said, "Joe, this enemy we're going to face—did it occur to you it might be something impervious to fire, ice or concussion? That this may be a battle of minds rather than muscle?"

I was forming a sarcastic reply, but something in her eyes stopped me. I said, "Sam Avers told me everything he knew. It sounded to me as though no one had much idea of what we're up against."

"That's about the size of it. I've evolved some theories on what lies ahead of us, but I almost hate to expound them before I have some tangible proof. If I'm wrong, my ideas would sound fantastic and silly."

"I think the situation is too serious to let personal feelings cramp our style. If you've got some ideas, I'd like to hear them."

She snubbed out her cigarette. "Well, in the first place, I think we're fighting a formless, single entity—not a dozen, nor a million, nor a planetful—just one entity that uses this planet as a base. I think it's self-supporting and self-perpetuating, except for one element—and I don't think that element is water vapor."

"It's need for water has been proven."

"Not necessarily. The extraction of water-vapor from Terra could be accidental. The entity could be after something entirely different."

"Such as what?"

"Mind power."

"I don't follow."

"This thing could be a gigantic mental parasite that sucks mind-stuff from the inhabitants of other planets."

I gaped at her. "That's—that's fantastic!"

She smiled. "I knew you'd say that. But good Lord! Why didn't you—?"

"The water theory was that of the Alliance Physicists Authority. I'm a member of the Psychiatric Committee that sat in on the emergency conference. It was integrated with both the Alliance Military, and Political Authorities."

"A pretty formidable array of talent. Did you advance your theory."

She smiled ruefully. "I did. I was voted down. And you know what that means in the

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high echelons. The water theory won a majority vote. That made it unanimous—no minority opinion allowed—that was why I had to concur."

"But personally, you don't believe it?"

Her eyes turned defiant. "No—and if that be treason, do with it as you will."

I scowled and said, "I was never much for majority opinions myself. But I think this theory of yours is a little far fetched."

"At least you'll keep an open mind."

"I'll do that. But I still expect to bump into something we can blast out of existence with a well-placed Plutoniam bomb."

She held out her hand. "Friends?"

I took it. "Friends," and wished this wasn't an official relationship. Things could have been interesting otherwise.

She left and I went back to work. But, thirty seconds later, I let out a howl. I got up and went to the door and caught her halfway down the companionway. "Come back here!"

Back in the office I pushed a requisition under her nose. "What in hell's this?"

She studied it a moment. "Oh, that. I supposed you knew."

"This is the first I've seen of it. Is this a sample your work?"

"Yes."

"Then will you tell me what in the all-fired devil we need of twenty scramblers?"

"They're for the birdmen."

She spoke as though that explained everything. I said, "And what do the birdmen need of scramblers?"

"Colonel Pagan—I haven't told you everything—the complete theory I've worked out—"

I blew up. "Listen! This is my expedition! I'm responsible for all the lives aboard, and—"

"Then I'd think you'd appreciate all the help you can get!"

"Shutup! I'm talking! I said I'm responsible for the expedition, and I'm damned if I'll have the weight-budget overloaded with fool contraptions just because you have a theory! We couldn't even bring medicos because of weight! Scramblers are made to block out radio communications. What in blazes will we need them for when we're going so far from Terra we couldn't even reach it by parcel post?"

She opened her mouth to

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answer me, but a knock on the door cut her off.

"Come in!" I roared

The door opened and Nick Wynn stood there—a set, serious look on his face. He saluted. "I've come to report, sir, that—"

"Well! Report and get out of here!"

"I was trying to, sir. The information is that three Martians are dead."

That brought me out of my chair. "Are you telling me the officers of this expedition can't keep their men from killing each other?"

"There was no fight, sir."

"But every man aboard was certified as being in perfect health!"

"The dead men were not sick, sir. That is, we have no reason to believe they were."

I followed Nick to the quarters of the Martians where Hap Hannigan was waiting. He saluted and I looked over the dead men. There appeared to be nothing wrong with them except that they were dead. They looked as ugly as usual—as normal as usual. The only thing wrong was that they'd quit living.

"If we could run some tests—" Nick Wynn said.

"We aren't equipped for it. This is an expedition, not a laboratory. Get the bodies overside." I turned to Hap. "How is this affecting the rest of the Martian contingent?"

"They're rather restless, but I don't think there will be any trouble."

I started back to my cabin. Diana was right behind me. She said, "I know how they died—and you know. We're getting closer to the snooper. Its power is stronger. It reached out and pulled the life force from those men."

She followed me into my cabin. I turned on her and said, "I'm running this expedition, Miss Abbot. I'll make the decisions."

"Yes—running it right into the ground, to coin a very old phrase! And I'll tell you this. You'd better issue those lead helmets or you'll land a lot of dead men on the snooper—if you land at all."

"And just what good are a bunch of lead helmets?"

"I think perhaps they'll insulate each individual's life force against the pull of whatever force we're fighting. I'm not sure that it will. If not, we're all through anyhow, but for heaven's sake—let's try it!"

"As I said, I'll make the decisions."

"Oh, you make me sick!" Then the door slammed and she was gone.

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I sat down at my desk and went through the rest of the requisitions. I fiddled with my pen a while and drew some doodads on a pad. I lit a cigarette and snubbed it out.

Then I snapped on the speaker and said, "All souls aboard, give attention—all souls aboard, give attention. Helmets will be issued to all personnel on the ship. They will be donned immediately and worn at all times. I mean at all times. They will not be removed for sleep or any other purpose. Colonel Joseph Pagan—Commanding Officer."

A few moments later, my intercom rang. It was Diana. She said, "Thanks—thanks a lot. I think it was a wise decision on your part."

"Oh, go to bed!"

"I'd love to have you come to my cabin for a nightcap."

I slammed down the hook.

A few seconds later, it rang again. Her voice was soft and lazy this time. "Please come. I want to see you."

I hung up without answering and went in and combed my hair and went out and down the companionway. Diana's cabin was at the far end. The door was ajar and the pressure of my knuckles swung it open. The cabin was dark and I hesitated on the threshold. Then a light snapped on, and I didn't just hesitate. I stood rooted to the floor. In the middle of the cabin stood Diana. A Diana I'd never seen before. My eyes got a little wide.

She was stark naked.

We both stood there frozen for some seconds. Then she broke the spell by turning and snatching up a robe and throwing it around herself. She said, "I'm—I'm sorry. I didn't expect you quite so soon."

My blood was pounding through my veins. "I think you're lying. I think you did that deliberately. Let me remind you that this is a military expedition, not a strip tease joint." I turned and strode back to my cabin, raging at myself for accepting the invitation in the first place. I sat down at my desk and caught myself remembering how she'd looked, standing there. I cursed myself for remembering—cursed her for what she'd done.

The intercom rang. I picked it up. She spoke without waiting for a hello. She said, "You're right, Colonel. It was deliberate. But my reason for doing it was far different than you think. I hope you never discover the true reason, but I think you probably will."

She snapped off and left me

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sitting there with my mouth open.

I steered clear of Diana for the next six days, bumping into her only at mess and once or twice in the lounge. This wasn't hard to do because the other men always had her surrounded during off-hours. I spent most of my time in the pilot house checking progress, or in my cabin trying to figure out what the hell kind of an expedition this was.

Checking the course was routine. This was one of the new automatic, high speed rockets. I'd ridden them before and they'd always made me feel completely useless. The speed, the orbit, the timing, even the arrival and landing, had been computed before blast-off. I always got the feeling that the precision instruments were saying, *Go back and sit down you stupid ass. We'll run this rocket.*

One thing intrigued me on this expedition, though. With all the vagueness entailed—with Diana's wild theories of what lay ahead—I wondered if there would really be a planet to land on. Maybe the whole thing was a vast illusion. Perhaps we'd travel in a huge orbit and land right back where we started.

But this didn't prove to be the case. The rocket came around into a gravity pull right on the split second and the instruments went to work with seeming disdain, to point the fins downward and lower the tube into a flat, yellow meadowland. Then the instruments stopped functioning with a bored sigh and said, *Okay, buster. Get going with your little war so we can all go home.*

I ran tests outside the shell and found oxygen, complete lack of atmospheric poison, and satisfactory gravitational pull.

After rechecking the results, I called a staff meeting in the lounge. My four Terrans were there when I arrived. My fifth Terran, too. She wore a close-fitting, black uniform and looked wholly desirable. Her breasts were still covered and, to show how silly a person can get over such things, there came a quick vagrant thought into my mind—a feeling of satisfaction that I was perhaps the only man alive who'd seen them.

The four officers saluted. I said, "At ease, men. From here out, we'll drop parade ground rules. The going may be rough and we probably won't have time for any heel-clicking."

Hap Hannigan dropped into a chair and grinned.

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"Man, I'm glad we're here. Those damn Martians are about ready to take the rocket apart."

Art Bolton's face was grim. "After those three deaths, I expected trouble. What do you suppose killed them?"

I glanced at Diana, sitting quietly on the lounge. She caught the look and almost smiled. "It's fortunate," she said demurely, "that more men didn't die."

"That's past history," I said harshly. "Wynn and I will make reconnaisance. If everything looks alright, we'll take our bearings and open the orders."

We armed ourselves with two ice guns and stepped into the air-lock. Sixty seconds later, the shell port opened and the ladder slid to the ground. I walked down. Hap followed. As we touched soil, the eight tail guns of the rocket covered us like a blanket.

The air was good, the sun was warm, and there was a cool pleasant breeze. The flora was strange, however; yellow, fat-bladed grass, thick and luxuriant and soft. It broke off easily and when I rolled it in my fingers it showed high water content and gave off a musky odor.

"Looks like Kentucky with the yellow jaundice," Nick said.

"Nothing very menacing so far."

Nick gripped his gun and frowned at me. "I wonder."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"I—I don't quite know. Maybe it's the result of natural tension, but it seems that—"

"What, man! Speak up."

"Well—" Nick swung his eyes in a wide arc, studying the horizon. Then they swung back to me. They held a strange look. "We're a long way from home," he said.

"Of course we are. What's got into you, Nick?"

His voice dropped to a whisper. "I want to go home, Joe."

"Go *home?* Well, for—"

Now his voice rose and reminded me of that of a child; a tired child, bewildered at the absence of familiar things. "Did you ever see Dad's collection of old cars, Joe. They're wonderful old relics! I'd like to have lived back there in the twentieth century, Joe. Back when Henry Ford and Walter Chrysler, and Durant were pioneering the great ages to come."

"Nick! What's got into you. This is—"

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His expression turned wild, panicky. "Joe—I want to go home!"

Then, out on that yellow prairie, it came into being; the thing we both saw at the same instant. A city, bright and sparkling in the sun. It could have been Detroit, or New York, or Atlanta, with their overslung highways and streets, their flying terraces, their tall, slim buildings. But there on the broad avenue a couple of hundred yards from us, was something that didn't belong in any city I'd ever seen; an old automobile right out of a museum, with big spoked wheels, brass radiator fittings and an open tonneau.

There were two people in the car, a man and a woman. The man wore a long white coat and the woman was bundled up in so much clothing, you wondered if she could ever get it all off. She wore a broad, flat hat with a weird veil pulled over it and tied under her chin.

They both looked our way. The woman smiled and waved and called out, but the sound of the ancient motor in the car drowned her words.

Nick grabbed my arm. "Look, Joe—look! It's an old Chalmers! Practically extinct! Dad heard there was one down in Alabama and I was going down to find out when you called me. I was thinking about it on the way out here and now I don't have to go to Alabama! It's right here waiting for us!"

My mind was spinning. I felt dizzy, as though some great force was pulling at me, trying to force me down. I was filled with a sense of great, unseen power around me.

Nick's reaction was different. He smiled at the strange couple, waved back at the woman, and began running toward the car. I yelled, "Nick! Nick! Come back here! It's an order! Come back!"

But he didn't seem to hear me. The car was moving slowly away, now, and Nick began to run. He called, "Wait! Wait!" and the man at the wheel turned and looked back and stopped the car. The woman made a beckoning motion and Nick increased his speed.

I shook off my dizziness and started after him, but at that moment, Diana's voice came through the amplifier in the nose of the rocket. "Joe! For God's sake, stay where you are! Don't follow him! Come back into the ship!"

At that moment, Nick Wynn reached the side of the ancient automobile. The wom-

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an held out her hand. Joe took it and put his foot on the big, ugly running board of the car. Then there was a quick, bright explosion that knocked me to the ground. It thundered and reverberated through the air, faded into echoes, and was gone.

I struggled to my feet and looked around like a punch-drunk fighter hunting for his opponent. But there was nothing. No city. No automobile. Only the torn, yellow meadow and Nick Wynn—or the remnants of him that were left.

He had been blown to pieces.

I turned around and staggered back into the open air-lock. As the shell port closed, I passed out.

"Feeling better, now?"

I felt a hand on my forehead. I opened my eyes and saw Diana seated on the edge of my bunk. I croaked, "What happened?"

Her eyes were grave and there was a touch of horror in them. "What I thought might happen. But I'm not being smug. I'm not saying, I told you so. I wish I'd been completely wrong."

I put my feet out of the bunk. She slid an arm around my shoulders, trying to help. I got up and took a turn around the cabin, striving to shake off the weakness.

"Are you able to talk?" Diana asked.

"Of course I'm able to talk."

Her eyes followed me around the table. "I thought you were going to be killed too."

"Thanks for yelling. It probably stopped me from following him."

"Once he got away from you, there was nothing you could do."

I turned on her. "You were right there at the mike. You must have been expecting this to happen."

"Not that necessarily. I was expecting something."

She sat on the edge of the bunk, her face pale, her hands pressed tightly together in her lap. I went over and took her by the shoulders and lifted her up. "I owe you an apology."

"For what?"

"For being stubborn. If I'd let you talk—listened to you—this might never have happened."

"How could you do that. You're a military man. You have to make your own decisions. This is war."

I shouldn't have lifted her up and brought her so close to me. Her face in front of mine. I put my arms around

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her and drew her close and kissed her.

She responded for a moment and then turned her face away. I got my senses back and said, "Sorry."

She drew away and went and looked out the port, then turned. "Joe tell me exactly what happened out there. What did he say before—"

I told her about the change in him; how he suddenly wanted to go home; how he seemed like a little boy.

When I got through, she said, "This tragedy at least shows us one of the entity's weapons."

"Maybe it shows you one of its weapons. It only leaves me confused."

"I'm sure of it, Joe. Let me tell you exactly what happened."

"I wish you would."

"This entity is formless and —well, mental. It has powers that go far beyond our knowledge of mind force. It can't fight with weapons as we do —that is, drive forward and blast. That's obvious. In Nick's case, it entered his mind and read it like a tape. It discovered the thing he loved most—old cars—"

"It did?" There was doubt in my voice.

"Of course."

"Then why—?"

"Why, what?"

"Never mind. Go ahead with what you were saying."

"It has the power, after learning what attracts each individual mind, of magnifying the desire, and of throwing an image, or a mirage with such force and reality that even others can see it."

"An optical illusion—magnified yearning—"

"Of course. And the illusion is a booby trap. A hidden bomb that explodes with the force of actual fissionable material."

I thought that over for a moment. "Tell me—how wide a range do you think this entity can function in?"

"I think a lot of variables are involved. I'm certain it can come close enough to Earth to draw off mind force—"

"But you don't think it can draw off this mind force from where it is now?"

She frowned. "I don't know —I'm groping. It may have drawn off the life force of some individuals. There is a variation, you know, in the strength of individuals. Possibly some can resist better than others."

"But you don't think it could throw one of these illusions as far as Terra."

"I don't know, but what

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difference does it make? The problem is here on the snooper so far as we're concerned. We know it can throw one here."

"That's right. I was thinking of another angle, but it's not important now. We've got to move ahead. We've got to complete this mission successfully." I walked over and stood in front of her again and lifted her chin. "I'll need all the help I can get. Any suggestions you have will be given every possible consideration."

"I want to help," she said, gravely.

I bumped her chin with a knuckle and grinned at her. "You're quite a gal. Or has somebody told you that before?"

She stared up into my eyes. There was obviously something on her mind. "Joe—?"

"Yes?"

"The other night—when you came to my cabin—"

"What about it?"

"I—I don't want you to think I'm that kind of a girl. I—"

She wanted to say more and I wanted to help her do it. "But you admitted it was deliberate."

"It was a mistake. A terrible mistake. But I'll try to make up for it. I'll stay very close to you and—"

"What are you trying to tell me?"

She bit her lip, then said, "Oh, never mind. Let's not talk about it now. Maybe later—"

I gave her another grin. "You know something?"

"What?"

"I liked it."

Her cheeks reddened. I liked that too. I hadn't seen a girl's cheeks redden in years. She said, "Joe—there's the little business of the expedition."

I opened the orders a few minutes later. I don't know exactly what I expected, but they read, in part: *The course of the rocket was pinpointed to a landing some fifty miles from the objective. This distance was decided upon because of the lack of knowledge concerning the enemy. It was felt that a landing any closer to the objective could be dangerous. Also, that a land offensive would be more effective and have greater chance of success than an aerial attack. You will advance across the intervening terrain and destroy the fortification or whatsoever you find to be in existence at the following point on the globe in question.*

The location was given in

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latitude based on the poles and longitude using the location of the rocket. The directional monitor in the pilot room checked the figures, gave us direction, and told us the distance to the theoretical objective was 48.4 Terran miles.

"And now," I said, "what's with those scramblers you slipped through on me?"

"I think they might be effective," Diana replied, "in guarding the company from mind invasion. This entity, whatever it is, will grow stronger as we approach it. But it must work on electronic principles and function over a wave-length. The scramblers cover all the effective wave-lengths we know of."

"If the birdmen wore them and kept a ceiling over the company—"

"That's what I had in mind."

The snooper revolved on an axis and had a four-hour day. We started at dawn, formed into a tight column that the birdmen could cover. The terrain was soft, springy, and the short yellow grass would make the going easy. When we were ready to move—each man armed with an ice gun and a small bomb thrower—I stood at the head of the column and called out, "How do we feel?"

The cry came back, loud and full of spirit. "Rotten!"

"Hows the situation?"

"It stinks!"

"Who's stupid?"

"The high brass!"

"You said it! Let's go!" And I swung off across the meadow, going into the chorus of the doggerel all space soldiers sing.

Oh, we'll drive the last
battalion,
Across the last terrain.
And on the day after eternity,
We'll plan the next campaign.

They fell in with me, moving on into the verses and we began eating up the miles between the rocket and our objective.

The sun wheeled swiftly across the heavens and soon the four-hour day was over. As there was no moon, I called a halt, feeling that it wasn't wise to travel in the dark until we knew more about the force we were planning to attack. I ordered rations broken out and passed the word along that the men were to get some sleep if they could—that we'd move again at dawn.

My three remaining Terrans ate with me, Diana also gracing the board. It wasn't

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a cheerful group. Jimmy Coslow brought up the subject on all our minds. "It doesn't seem the same without him, does it?"

"He was a good man," Hap Hannigan grunted. "Never should have been a soldier. Too sensitive. Too much of a gentleman."

"We had some big times together," Art Bolton said.

"Let's forget it," I told them. "This is an expedition. The morale of the men is high. Let's keep the officer morale up there too."

They didn't feel like talking about anything else, so we ate in silence. Then they went off to post the guards and I told Diana. "You'd better get some sleep."

"I'm not very tired."

"You'll need it. And don't worry. Nothing will happen. The birdmen are going to keep us covered. They can sleep hanging on their wings."

"It all seems so simple, doesn't it?"

"I think your idea about the scramblers licked the thing, whatever it is."

"What makes you so sure."

I shrugged. "We marched four hours and nothing's happened yet."

Diana was not convinced. "I wish I had your confidence."

"What makes *you* so doubtful?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because I think the entity is stronger and more intelligent than that. I can't see a simple thing like a scrambler stopping it."

"Then why hasn't it struck?"

"I don't know."

We were off at dawn the next morning. The men had evidently forgotten the three Martians who died on the way over, and their lack of tenseness indicated they didn't expect any more mirages such as the one that killed Nick Wynn. We swung along at a good clip and I was just telling myself, once and for all, that Diana's fears were groundless.

Then annihilation smashed down on us.

I felt the wave of power—an intangible force that was like a wind that made nothing move. Diana felt it too, and she clutched my arm with trembling fingers.

Then the Martians, with roars of savage rage, turned in their tracks and charged back at the Venusians. The Venusians were ready. They came screaming forward and met the Martians head on. In a matter of seconds, a pitched

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battle—a battle to the death—was in progress.

A commander's job is to think—to make decisions—and to act. I knew instantly that discipline had gone kiting; that no power in the System could stop this slaughter. I bellowed at the Terrans—the officers—to come forward. Then I dived behind a hummock with Diana, told her to lie still, and came up on one knee to cover the Terrans.

Hannigan didn't make it. Following his instincts as a soldier, he tried to restore order among the Martians and was torn to pieces by the first bomb. Coslow and Bolton dropped and began snaking forward. I froze two Venusians who went after them and when they got behind the hummock I started them digging in while I watched the battle. I hoped it would die out to a point where I could risk an attempt at discipline. But there was never a chance.

The birdmen had evidently not been affected by the madness. But they became confused and the Martians began potting them out of the sky. I got up and signalled them up out of range, then dropped as a bomb gun sent a projectile through the spot I'd been standing.

The Martians were moving in on what was left of the company, now, their ice guns freezing the Venusians—and the others—into statues that shattered into a thousand bits as they dropped.

Finally there were only a dozen Martians left of the whole company and I knew what I had to do. They assembled momentarily in the midst of the slaughter and turned their hot eyes in our direction. I fired point blank just as they turned to charge. The ray went true—sprayed like a powerful fire hose and I froze them in a dozen weird positions. They toppled and broke; the last of my company, and I got to my feet and looked out across the nightmarish field.

In all my years of campaigning, I'd never seen anything like it. The torn fragments of bodies lay in heaps. Grotesque lumps of frozen flesh covered the yellow meadow. Even our walking blood banks had been caught in the squeeze. Huddled in a group, they'd been hit dead-center by a bomb. A moment later, an ice ray had showered across them, to leave a shining frozen surface of green ice.

Jimmy Coslow came drunkenly to his feet. "Good God! What happened?"

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"They got mad at each other," I said.

Jimmy Coslow stared across the field with dazed eyes. "It just doesn't make sense! They suddenly went crazy!"

I looked down at Diana. "You were right again, lady. It was too easy. We were walking along in a fool's paradise."

I gave Diana my hand and she got to her feet. She said, "The entity waited, held its power back. Then, at just the right moment, it struck out with a new weapon."

"How stupid can I get," I said bitterly. "I tried to think of everything the entity could do to us mentally. I completely overlooked the most obvious thing—playing one planetary hatred against another. I knew that only rigid discipline kept those beasts from each other's throats."

"It wasn't your fault. If you *had* known it was going to happen, what could you have done?"

"I'd have marched them in several miles apart! I should have done that anyhow! I ought to be court-martialed."

"Did you ever keep Alliance troops separated in any other campaign?" Jimmy Coslow asked.

"No, but this was different—"

"Stop blaming yourself," Diana said. "The point is—what are we going to do now?"

"You three are going back to the rocket. I'm going on."

"Like hell we are," Bolton said. "Jimmy's going to take Diana back, but I'm going with you."

"I think taking Diana back is your job, Art," Jimmy said. "You're more reliable. Joe and I will—"

"Who said I was going back?" Diana yelped. "You two escort each other. I'll—"

"Who's in command of this expedition?" I asked.

"You are," Diana said, "but I don't think any orders of that type will be obeyed."

I didn't think they would either, so I didn't make an issue of it. "All right. We'll go on. But God only knows how far we'll get."

Two birdmen had survived. They dove down now, from a high altitude and hovered overhead.

"Do you think we can trust them?" Jimmy asked.

"We've got to," Diana said. "We need them. Any power deflection we can get will help just that much."

I signalled the birdmen to hold a point with their scramblers about twenty yards ahead of us at a thirty-foot

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altitude. They chirp morosely and took up their positions and we started out.

We covered as many miles as we could before sundown. Nothing happened except that the meadow turned purple for no apparent reason.

At sundown, we made camp in a small swale, placing a scrambler at either end of it. We broke out rations and I ordered everybody to bed, taking the watch myself. Coslow and Bolton were exhausted and went to sleep instantly. The birdmen too, twittering uneasily in their dreams.

I'd been sitting for perhaps fifteen minutes when there was a stirring beside me. Jumpy as a cat, I dived at it. There was a gasp and I realized I had Diana in my arms.

"Why didn't you say something?" I demanded. "I might have killed you."

"Sorry. I should have. I didn't want to awaken the others and I was trying to find you in this pitch-black."

"Why don't you go to sleep?"

She huddled close beside me. "I can't. I was asleep, but it woke me up—trying to get in. Can't you feel it, Joe? We're getting close and it's stronger and more desperate."

I could feel it all right, but I'd kept telling myself it was my imagination. I said, "I just feel terribly depressed—down in the dumps. I know we can't possibly win and I'm kicking myself for not sending you back. We can't make it, Diana."

"That's the power, Joe—the entity. That's the way it's manifesting itself—trying to hammer you down. Don't allow it Joe." Suddenly she was very close. "Here," she whispered. "Kiss me—kiss me hard. Forget everything and kiss me."

I did as she asked and for thirty seconds, the world stopped. Then her lips were close to my ear, whispering again. "Joe, aren't you going to fight? For me? Are you going to let this thing destroy what we might have together—after we get back to Terra?"

"You're goddam right I'm not!" I said. Then I pushed her slowly away—but not too far.

"Is it better, now, Joe?"

"A lot better."

"Don't let it get you again."

I held her in my arms and said, "Listen—why am I—all of us—so weak, and why are you so strong?"

She thought it over. "I'm not strong, really. If I can resist better, I think it's because of my training. Maybe I can

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define better—maybe the pattern of its tricks are clearer in my mind."

"Whatever it is—kiss me again, angel."

But she held back. "No, Joe. It's better that I don't. And please try to forget this. Wipe it from your mind."

"Do you think I can do that?"

"No. I guess you can't. That's what worries me."

On that cryptic note, our conversation ended. And it was not until the next day that I knew what she meant.

The following morning, at dawn, I quietly slipped my arms from around Diana and crawled along the swale to awaken the others. But they wouldn't awaken. All four of them were very quiet and would never awaken again.

I went back to Diana. She stirred and opened her eyes. I said, "Wake up, baby. We're all alone."

She came awake instantly and I could see her wide eyes in the pale light. "What do you mean, Joe?"

"The rest of them are dead."

She shuddered. "It—it got in."

"It sure did. But why didn't it get us too—you and me?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because we sat close together. Perhaps it couldn't have attacked without alerting us."

"Alerting *you*," I said. "You've protected me from the beginning."

"Don't say that, Joe. We've worked together."

"I've done a fine job. My entire company gone."

Dawn had come up now. Diana had gotten to her feet. Now she stiffened. "Joe—Joe!" She clawed backward for my hand. I straightened up and looked. "Joe—it's there," she whispered. "See? About a mile over. We—we camped right on top of it!"

I looked where she pointed and it was very strange. I saw it and yet I didn't. It was formless, yet that great spout of energy welling up from the ground was *visible*. Perhaps I didn't see it with my eyes, but rather with my mind. At any rate, I looked across the purple meadow and knew I was looking upon the lair of the entity that could draw living force from animal organisms across half a system. And while there was no brightness, I covered my eyes and went to the ground and dug my fingers into the soil.

Diana was down beside me. I said, "No! No! It's impossible! I can't face it! We've got to go back! We've got to

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crawl back on our bellies and get in the rocket and get the hell out of here!"

Diana was holding me. "Joe—Joe, my darling. You *can* beat it. I'm going to help you."

"I'd tie you hand and foot before I'd let you go a step nearer!"

"I know you would, darling. That's why I'm not going up there. But you are. Because I'm going to help you!"

"How can you help?"

She took me in her arms and held me like a baby while a great surge of power drove and eddied around us. It was as though the entity, knowing now that it had been discovered, was throwing everything it had at us.

Then the power abated, gentled down, and was gone. I raised my head and looked out across the meadow and there was Diana.

She stood naked, enticing on the purple grass of the meadow, smiling at me and beckoning. And never in my life had I wanted a woman so much. And I was going to have her! Honor, position, responsibility, decency—all of that meant nothing. I'd worry about them afterwards. Besides—who would know? Diana wouldn't talk. I'd see to that.

I was up and out of the swale, my arms reaching. The naked Diana stood with her head thrown back—calling.

Then the sky fell on my head.

I came to with my aching skull in Diana's lap. I opened my eyes and looked up into her face. She was crying. "Darling—darling—are you all right?"

"Sure—sure—"

"Thank God it didn't get you while you were out!"

"What happened?"

"I hit you. I brought you down with the butt of an ice gun. It was the only way."

"But you were out there—with all your clothes off."

"That was a booby trap. The image you carried away from my cabin that night. I should have been whipped for what I did. But then I didn't realize the danger—what we were really up against. I was going to use you as a test for my theory. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forget it, angel. Let's get out of here before it thinks of something else. Maybe if we go away it will let us alone."

She held me tight. "No, Joe. We can't. You're going in there and smash it. I'm going to help you. Remember what I said?"

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"There's nothing you can do."

She turned my head around until I was facing her. "Look at me, Joe. Look into my eyes."

I looked. I couldn't help looking. Her eyes were right in front of my nose. She said, "None of this is really true, Joe. Not a bit of it."

There was something in her deep, fixed eyes that held me—that made me know she told the truth. "Of course not. Nothing to it at all."

"No entity, Joe. No force. Only a cement tower you've been sent to blow up. All you have to do is walk over and smash it and then we can go away and be together. You and I. All you have to do is smash the tower—the tower—smash the tower, Joe. See it there? The tower . . ."

Of course I could see it. I wasn't blind. And why was she telling me this? I'd come up here to smash that tower. She didn't have to tell me my job.

I got to my feet and Diana said, "There will be a wind, Joe—a howling gale you will have to push against, but you aren't afraid of a wind, are you Joe—not afraid of a wind—"

What was wrong with this dame? She was nuts. Of course there was a wind. I'd been pushing against it a long time and now I'd about reached my objective. The tower. Smash the tower. Was she trying to talk me out of it? Stop me? I pushed her roughly away. I took an ice gun in one hand and a bomb thrower in the other and started toward the tower. As I walked, I thought I heard a voice call. "Oh, my darling. Please come back to me. I'll pray—pray for you. You *must* come back!" It was the dame. She was raving. I wondered why we'd brought a dame on the expedition to smash this damned tower.

I walked against the wind and it got stronger. It was a regular gale. But the tower got closer and closer. No chance of missing now. The wind almost swept me off my feet as I aimed the bomb gun. It was a dead-center shot. Square at the base. A balloon of blue flame.

But there was never a tower in God's universe like this one. It didn't make a noise like tumbling cement. It screamed and howled. It bellowed and whined. It moaned like a lost soul. A hell of a tower.

I gave it one more bomb and it was still. Then I moved in and froze the place I'd

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smashed. I set the ice gun at its greatest capacity and sent the heap and the soil around it down to four thousand degrees below zero. That tower was dead when I got through.

I was weak as a cat, lying there on the purple meadow. Diana was bending over me. I felt weak, but sane. In fact all the madness was gone from the air and this was only a wornout, derelict planet they'd push out of the System and send on its way.

I sat up and said, "So you hypnotized me. It was as simple as that."

"Not simple. You could still have been killed because we didn't actually know it would work."

"But it did."

"And now we can go back."

First, though, we went over and looked at the hole the entity had lived in. A great black cave, but clean, now with the power of the formless beast scattered all over the universe and beyond.

We were scheduled to make our report to the Alliance Authority on the Friday following our return to Terra. That gave me just enough time to do what had to be done.

The meeting convened on schedule and Diana and I spent an hour giving details. We were questioned closely, but there was no criticism from any member except Gregory Winthrop, the civilian member I'd first seen on Sam Aver's video screen. Winthrop said, "While the success of the expedition is gratifying, the loss of life was none the less appalling."

I said, "I realize that, sir. No one feels it more keenly than I do."

"You ask us to believe it occurred as the result of this entity drawing thought matter from the minds of the men and projecting a booby trap in the form of an image. This and not any carelessness on your part."

"As to my carelessness, I make no defense. The board must decide. But I did not say the images came entirely from the minds of the men who died."

"But I thought—"

"Certain material for these images was given the entity by a Terran—the contact was made and the material projected right here in Minneapolis."

The board stiffened to a man. I went on, "You see, I got suspicious when Nicholas Wynn was lured to his death by the image of an ancient automobile. If that had been

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taken from his mind, the 1910 background would also have been taken. But the entity projected the car against the background of a modern city. That indicated that Wynn's love of the ancient vehicles and a description of one, together with the costumes of those ancient people, was furnished the entity by someone who was not himself familiar with a 1910 background."

"But—"

"That, coupled with the fact my psycho chart was missing when I went for my checkup, set me thinking. Just yesterday, I spent some time going into that angle. I discovered that the psycho charts of the four men I picked to accompany me on the expedition had also been hurriedly pulled before they got their checks, and in each case, the master files had to be referred to."

"I think we have about all the information we need, gentlemen," Winthrop said.

"No you haven't, sir. At least the board hasn't. As I said, I checked carefully, and in each case, the charts were picked up by messenger at the request of one Gregory Winthrop."

A gasp went through the room. Winthrop reddened. "I frankly admit I asked for the charts. I wanted to assure myself the men were qualified."

"I think not, sir. In that case, you'd have wanted the complete file. Not just the psycho charts, showing the traits, desires, weaknesses and preferences of each man—all the entity was interested in."

There was dead silence in the room. I broke it. "Sir, I accuse you of consorting with the enemy—of murdering Nicholas Wynn. I call you a traitor. I'm sure the board will consider this a serious enough matter to insist upon truth tests."

There was a moon and a table overlooking the lake. I was there and so was Diana, and the world was a wonderful place. Diana set down her drink. "But why did he do it, Joe. I know he confessed and explained how the entity reached him—through his video set—but why would he do a thing like that?"

"It convinced him Terra didn't have a chance. It offered him immunity as the price of treachery."

Diana sighed. "And he dies tomorrow."

"Let's forget that. This is a wedding supper—remember."

Diana blushed. "I remember. Let's go home." **THE END**

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ourselves of yesterday

By T. D. HAMM

Time travel to the days of the caveman can be fun—if you remember to take along a blueprint of the future!

THE wide, dark eyes that Mera Blake turned on the squat black cube in the center of the room held horror in their depths, but the look she turned on her companion lost nothing of its resolution.

"I'm going with you," she said steadfastly. "And don't try to be reasonable!"

John Cameron looked at his determined fiance with an expression compounded of admiration and exasperation.

"But, Mera, we still don't know what happened. All we do know for certain is that your father went in, the cube disappeared—and when we set the dial for the exact moment he specified, the cube reappeared. With nothing inside, but . . . that."

He returned fascinated eyes to the enigmatic heap of dust lying in the center of the cube.

"Isn't that enough to know?" she demanded fiercely. "We *can't* leave him stranded back there."

"There's no question of leaving him; I'm going back myself."

"And what if *you* go . . . and don't come back? I've still got the plans. I'd have another cube made and go alone. And . . ." her voice broke, "I'd be *afraid* to go . . . alone."

He spread his hands in a gesture of unwilling capitulation.

"It's going to be rather cramped," John said, his eyes going worriedly about the small interior of the cube. "But, I don't see what we can leave out."

"Details — details!" gibed Mera goodnaturedly. "If you are afraid of being uncomfortable, I know two or three other boys who wouldn't mind at all!"

"You little demon!" He grabbed at her.

There was a brief interval of "John!—you idiot! . . . Put

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me *down*!" before he set her down, dabbing at short, black curls with an expression which tried to be indignant and succeeded only in dimpling into irresistible laughter.

"This is a fine way for two serious scientists to behave," she said tartly, "and I warn you I don't intend to put up with it."

"You can always walk back! But, seriously," his grin faded, "I don't see what we can leave out. There's just ourselves and the clothes we have on and a few food concentrates."

She peered into the cube doubtfully. "Unless we take out the guns . . ."

His face set sternly. "No! Don't forget the professor

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didn't take any weapons, and . . ."

"And he didn't come back," she finished unhappily. "Well, anyway, it won't actually take very long will it? To get there, I mean?"

"According to our calculations it should be practically an instantaneous interval."

Mera creased her brows doubtfully. "Who will set the return dial for us?"

"I think a clock arrangement keyed to the dial will do it. See, a couple of wires run from here to this connection." He picked up his tools with frowning concentration. "As a matter of fact, I wanted to do it that way and go with the Professor, but, he was determined to see it through alone."

An hour later he stood back with a grunt of satisfaction. "There she is, ready to go. Well, shall we go now . . . or would you rather wait for tomorrow?"

"Right now; before I have a chance to get *really* scared." She lifted a suddenly pale face. "Kiss me once . . . for luck?

He kissed her lingeringly and then broke the tension with a brisk pat that bounced her protesting into the cube.

He closed the door with it's complicated lever mechanism and forced a laugh of excitement. "Cavemen, here we come!"

Mera smiled waveringly.

"In a minute we'll realize old Omar's lines . . . 'Ourselves with Yesterday's seven thousand years . . .'"

They were unprepared for the pain. Pain which wrenched and gripped them till every atom of every cell was a nucleus of soul-shattering agony as their body-structure was almost instantaneously reversed through ten thousand years of cellular memory. Fortunately, the pain-threshold of the civilized human-being is low; as it reached its crescendo both mercifully blacked out.

And the two squat, subhuman beings who came back to consciousness had no memory of the pain. Nor of Mera Blake or of John Cameron.

Crouching half-erect, hairy and heavy-jawed, they rent and tore each other savagely, as they fought uncomprehendingly the final enemies of starvation and suffocation, battering themselves against the steel walls, frantic for escape.

The door was plainly marked.

But Neanderthal man knew nothing of doors.

THE END

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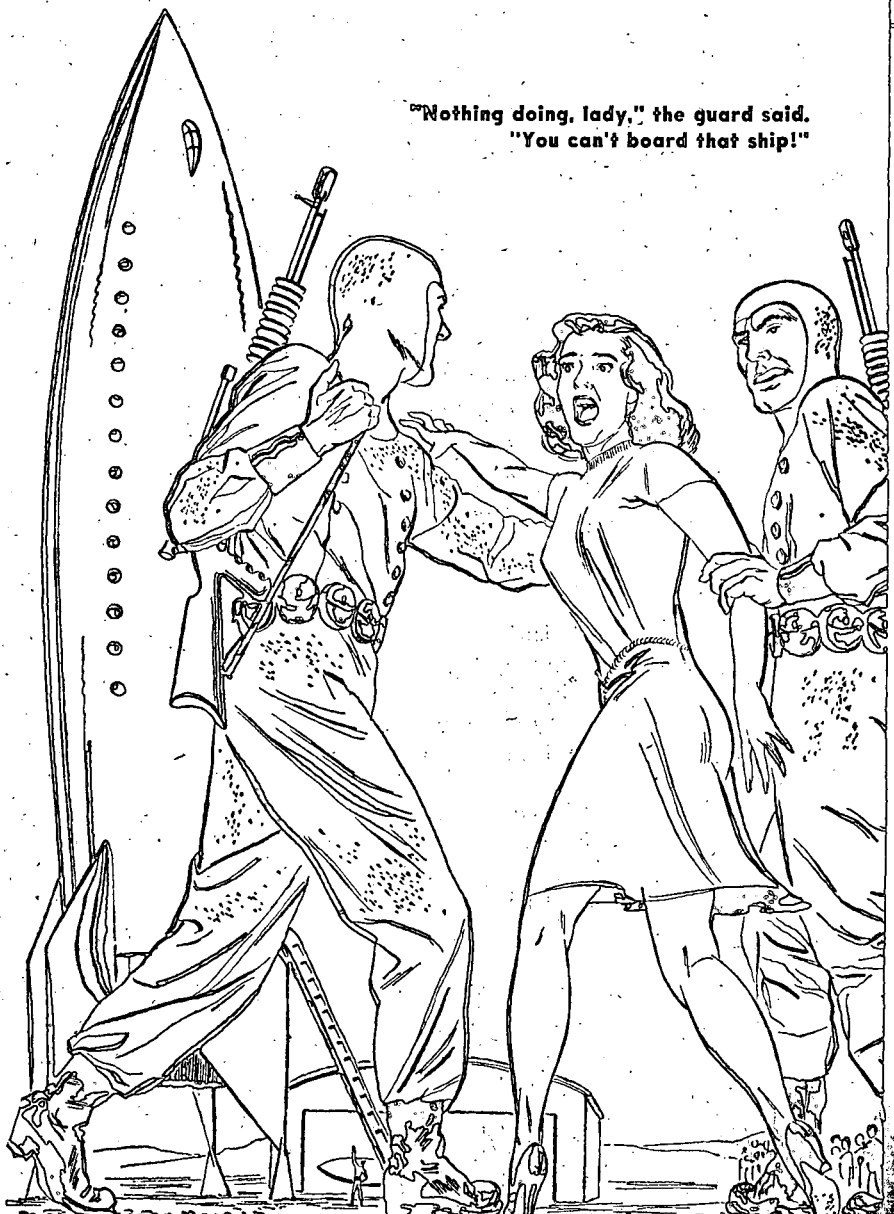

"Nothing doing, lady," the guard said. "You can't board that ship!"

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While My Love Waits

By HENRY STILL

Twenty-four years in space! You've got to have a mighty strong reason for coming home after a trip like that. How about a gorgeous woman the psyche boys have trained to wait for you? Fine—only be very sure you don't come back too soon. You might learn you've been away much too long!

"WITHOUT the promise of pleasure, you'll never come back," the director said. "The only sure thing we've ever found is a woman."

"Even if I have to wait twenty-four years to love her?"

Melchoir, the director, ran a hand through his graying hair.

"That isn't so long, not when you stay virile to eighty-five or ninety. I'll be ninety-two in August."

"I'll be thirty-eight," Dare Langen said, "or however old you figure it when I reach that time in space."

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"You'll still be accelerating," Melchoir said. "I don't think there's any way to compute it accurately, probably the time dilation will be negligible until later.

"I don't want to go," Dare said quietly.

Melchoir missed the humor highlights in the soft gray eyes. The long, gangling leg slung over the arm of the chair swung casually. The director sat up sharply.

"You've got to go! We've psyched you, drilled you, conditioned you for years. You can't even think of not going. You and Bernard, the only one's we've conditioned for the stars."

"I love Tress more than you thought I would." Dare was serious now. "I don't think I can leave her that long."

Then Melchoir's exasperation flickered angrily like sulphur in a flame.

"Sailors have been saying that for centuries, but they managed to live pretty well. Now there's twelve billion people in the Solar System, an exploding population, and you let personal, physical love stand in the way of forestalling disaster? It would take ten years to train someone like you. Then it's too late."

"Don't go humanistic, Doc," Dare said softly. "You gave me the love, remember?"

"Yes, I know." Melchoir sighed at the impasse.

"I didn't like you choosing me someone to love," Dare said, "someone to be married to the rest of my life. It's like ancient India and the child brides—choose a baby wife and wait for her to reach puberty to consummate it."

"But you know why we did it!"

"Oh, sure," Dare chuckled. "Excellent planning. You put us together in the right situations so I could recognize her maturity of emotion and spirit, so she could see the pixie in me and learn to love."

"Tress is nineteen. You're thirty-eight," Melchoir said slowly. "We've calculated as carefully as we can. When you return there will be one warm rich person who won't be out of step with you. She can lead you back to the world despite its changes in twenty-four years."

"Yes I know," Dare said impatiently. "Ophiuchi is twelve light years away. At .99 the speed of light it will take twenty-four years, a little more, to go and return. But you say the time dilation effect will age me only five or six years. So I'll be forty-five,

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Tress forty-three or so when I get back. The perfect couple."

"We didn't plan for Bernard," Melchoir said. "He's been gone to Procyon for eight years now. He may never return. Even with the months of sleep he may die of boredom, or simply lack incentive to return. It's still true, there must be a woman to come home to." He smiled warmly.

"I'll buy it, Doc," Dare said. Obviously, there was no choice. "But you'd better be right."

"Of course we're right! You know the calculations, and you know Tress is conditioned to wait for you. It would have been better if you could have married first. A man hurries home to see his firstborn, but . . ."

"But I may not come back," Dare said calmly. "That would be complicating wouldn't it." Melchoir nodded gravely.

"I'm not a sacrificial lamb," Dare said. "I want to see the stars and I want a woman and a home when I get back. If I get back."

"You will," Melchoir assured hastily. "The photon drive has been in space. It was tested to the Pluto orbit and back."

"Centauri would be simpler."

"No planets," Melchoir spread his hands helplessly. "Helker observatory on Mars showed that five years ago. Ophiuchi has planets. You find out if we can live there."

Dare looked at his watch.

"Look, Doc. I've got twenty-four hours to zero and a twenty-four-hour date. Will you excuse me?"

"Take it easy," Melchoir suggested.

"Don't worry," Dare laughed easily, "I don't want a twenty-four-year-old son to greet his hero daddy at the space port."

"It will be *so* long, Dare! How many times have sweethearts said that, the promise of separation lending painful poignancy to the depth of love.

Tress held his hand between her own, caressing the bristly hair with her fingertips.

"I told Melchoir I didn't want to go."

Tress drew in her breath sharply, a touch of hope in her eyes, but Dare shook his head.

"No, I'll go." He repeated Melchoir's argument of exploding population, but it was a flat statistic of no substance beside the personal sparkling

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jewel of their passion, their intense need for each other.

"They tell me I'll wait for you," Tress murmured. "I suppose I will. I can't imagine life without you." Her voice caught, huskily. "But I don't know how they'll help me live through the years."

"The psychos buttered your motivations the same way they did mine," Dare said. "It's enough to bridge the years unless some emotional crisis comes along to dislodge it."

Her fingers moved up from his hand, the slender, white, sensitive fingers, moving inside the loose sleeve of his shirt. She caressed the soft hollow of his elbow and massaged the hard muscle, pouring the sense of his flesh into her mind so she would remember.

Dare caught her and held the trembling body while his mouth intensified its hunger in her lips. Tress stared up at him with tear-stars in her eyes.

"Dare," she whispered, "could we be married?"

She tempted him with the rich, ripening of her body, the translucent glory of her flesh newly-emerged from adolescence.

"We can't," he said, breathing heavily. "No one says we can't, but there's no one at this hour."

"I don't mean that. I mean just the two of us, to be married now, this hour, for eternity."

"No! I can't wait twenty-four years to see my first child."

"We can prevent that."

He took her roughly in his hands and held her for a moment, like a child.

"We'll never prevent it," he said. "When I come back, I want a home and children, your children and you. Do you see that?"

"Yes, I see it," her eyes hardened queerly, "but I want you now, and I'll keep you." She bit him viciously on the lip and held his mouth. The shock was like a rocket exploding in his flesh. . . .

Later Tress slept. Dare did not. Through the night he watched the stars and city lights through the ceiling high windows of her apartment, measuring the years.

With dawn he pulled away, perspiration forming a flesh bond as hard to break as the emotional one. Tress stirred, stretched her satisfied body like a cat and watched him dress.

"You're going?"

"I have to." He held her

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urgently. "The wheel is turning, the whole Solar System turns on me. I have to." Dare was miserable.

"Go on then," she said dully and her violent sobs sounded his way out the door.

Tress should have flown out to the space station with them.

In the rocket, Melchoir chewed his lip thoughtfully, waiting for Dare to explain. Tress should have been there, her flesh and lips the last to touch the spaceman, so he could not forget to return, no matter what distortions lay in the infinity of time and space.

"She'll never wait for me!" Dare blurted in the throbbing silence as the rocket braked toward the gleaming fat sausage hanging in space.

Melchoir turned quickly, startled.

"What do you mean?"

"She's too young, not stable enough for this. Turn her loose."

Melchoir saw disaster, another starship swallowed in the void. Dare told him of their parting.

"Believe me, psychiatrists can do anything these days," Melchoir said urgently. "You've left her a poignant memory, a sharper sense of you than could have been any other way. A woman never forgets her first man. If there's any sign of drift, the psychos know how to forestall it."

They walked through a tubular spoke of the space station, guiding themselves by hand-rail as the artificial gravity dwindled near the center.

The *Star II* was the skeleton of a stubby cone with the reactor forming the central core. An annular tube formed the base circle, high enough for a man to walk its circumference inside, threading his way among the mass of instruments which would keep Dare alive through his years in space. The nose opened like a funnel.

"The antiproton gave us annihilation of matter for Bernard's voyage," Melchoir mused, "but he had to carry his own substance for fuel. For half a century we tried to find a way to shield the nose against cosmic dust and gas. Now we're smart. You'll collect it for fuel."

Dare was not thinking of the stars. Right now he was a young man who had left an unhappy woman behind. He knew how to run the starship.

"Let's get on with it," he

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said impatiently. Melchoir gripped his hand.

"She'll be here when you get back," he promised.

Dare climbed through the jury-rigged transfer tube and slammed the machined hatch shut behind him.

From a port in the space station ring, Melchoir watched. With deceptive laziness, the slow booster rocket fired, lifting the crude cone gently away.

"On my way," Dare's voice crackled, unreal in the radio. The ship was a dwindling star itself when the booster stopped firing and fell away. Then a beam of white light split the black heavens as the photon drive cut in.

Dare wondered if Tress, lithe and savage and naked, saw the light from the window of her bedroom.

Speed is relative. Don't answer yourself or you're cracking up. *Time is relative.*

At this point in time and space, the only proof of Dare's existence were two rows of flourescent numerals. One told him a month had passed since his departure. The other registered the non-commital number .715—relative to C-velocity. No reference point told him the amount of time that had passed on Earth since he had touched Tress.

Unembarrassed in his solitude, Dare kept the flavor of her body for a week on his lips, the color of her rouge on his cheek. Later he washed the marks of love away, but by then he could imagine the taste and color still were there.

The force of beamed light pressed him through the void at a steady lg acceleration. But Dare had power to touch. He was awake each time the nose collector reached critical mass. Automatically the starship would leap forward at 5gs. By hand control he could increase this to 10.

It became a solitary game to test his endurance at higher and higher acceleration. And each burst inched him closer to the Big C, each burst an hour nearer Tress and their hearth.

Tress? Almost a dream now. But Tress would wait. He must live on that faith, breathe it, digest it into the cells of his body, or he would never live to see the star.

Point nine-five-three.

Dare cracked a ration and ate slowly, trying to draw his mind away from the hideous, crawling moments.

Point nine-eight-eight.

Critical mass. The crushing

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force of 8gs gripped the body he had trained to endure it, but true again was less. The *Star II* labored near C-velocity, waiting with its impenetrable barrier, where the puny machine of man would touch infinite mass and all the energy in the galaxy could not move it.

Point nine-nine-one. Point nine-nine-four. Point nine-nine-seven.

False glory buoyed him, the first man to reach this near the shuttling needle of light that sewed the galaxy, the universe together.

He was Adam, the first man. Don't touch the apple, don't touch the speed of light.

.991 . . . 994 . . . 997.

Why steps of three up the invisible ladder?

That surprised question burned across Dare's mind as he pushed the lever to 9gs.

Light rimmed his eyes.

Cold blue light closed a camera lens slowly over the iris. St. Elmo's fire danced across the instruments, burning blue light opening a great gaping hole in the void.

An infinite number of minute, shattering crystals tinkled in his ears.

Then there was light, nothing more.

Dare had no memory.

But there was the moon. And Earth.

Madness.

Ophiuchi could not have Earth and a moon.

Dare looked. The twin, dazzling globes of Ophiuchi were not there. He scrambled to the bank of instruments. Yards of tape curled like white worms over the bulkhead, filled with data he could not read, data he could not remember.

The *Star II* was decelerating. Dare checked. Less than 90,000 miles an hour. The computer whirred softly, setting his course and speed for Earth.

What in the name of God had happened?

He tried the radio.

"Earth Z3d, this is *Star II*. Over."

A note of surprise marked the crackling voice that answered him.

"Repeat name and call letters please."

"This is the *Star II*," Dare repeated, his voice strange in his ears, "inbound from 70 Ophiuchi."

"Roger," the voice answered, "take form eight in the central maze."

A green light on the control panel indicated he was riding a radio beam. An hour later, the *Star II* nestled into

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a complicated mass of steelwork and ships—a space station which dwarfed the one he had left—how many years ago?

An automatic flextube clamped around the hatch. Dare crawled through. He was in a bare metal room, alone.

Then something prodded him in the back. It was the muzzle of a gun.

"Are you—Dare Langen?"

"Of course," Dare answered his unseen assailant. "You expecting the man in the moon?"

The guard prodded him across the room. A door opened and Dare entered a well-furnished recreation room.

"We'll see," the guard said grimly. "The director's on his way up."

A moment later Melchoir burst into the room and gripped Dare's hand.

"My God, it's good to see you!" The puzzled guard backed away.

"Put that thing away," Dare suggested. "What's this all about? Where's Tress?"

"Let's let the medics have a look first," Melchoir said, "then we'll talk." There was a tremble in the old man's voice. Melchoir had aged!

A machine took care of the physical examination in five minutes. Dare dressed. Melchoir was waiting.

"What did you find?"

"I don't know," Dare said slowly, "I don't remember anything."

A doctor beckoned the stellar director out of the room. A half hour later Melchoir came back. His eyes wandered over Dare's form as though he had never seen him before.

"Dare, something very strange has happened."

"Hell, I know that! I passed out. The ship must have turned in space and returned. How long was I gone, two years?"

"It was eighteen years."

The words dropped softly, tiny meteors in the void, dropping forever. It was some moments before Dare could grasp their meaning.

"Then I almost made it. Eighteen years — and for nothing!"

Melchoir shook his head.

"You were there," he said, haltingly. "You scouted Ophiuchi. There are complete tape records of a planet that will bear human life." Dare felt perspiration break out in his armpits, across his forehead.

"Then—" he moistened his lips, "then what am I? Where is Tress?"

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Melchoir called out the door. Tress came in.

She was almost the same. The same beautiful deep eyes, the lithe figure only a little filled out. There were lines around her eyes and mouth he could not remember.

But Tress was thirty-seven now. He thought swiftly. He could not be much older. What happened to time dilation when you passed the Big C?

Dare waited until adrenalin gave new strength to his legs. He stood up shakily and took her in his arms, kissing her lips, her face, her hair. Tress did not respond.

The door opened. Another man, a stranger, appeared. Tress gently disengaged Dare's arms.

"This is Paul Mason, my husband," she said simply.

Dare sagged back into the chair. The blue light returned, blazing light spinning in his brain and the agony moved out of his mind and heart, burning through his body.

"I'm sorry, Dare."

The soft splattering sound of her pity burned his body like an atomic torch, touching off the rage reflex.

"Sorry?" he said. "Why should you be sorry? You've lived for eighteen years. I've been dead. You were going to lead me back to life, remember?"

His harsh laughter echoed in the room.

"No one betrayed you, Dare. You must believe that." The starman shook off Melchoir's hand. "We lost your signal when you were less than a year out. Don't you see? We could only assume you were dead."

"But no one cared enough to wait," Dare said dully. "Where do I go from here. Half of my life gone for nothing."

"Not half," Melchoir said. "Not even a fourth of it."

Dare looked from face to face, saw his bewilderment reflected.

"What does that mean?" Tress twiddled a ring nervously on her finger. Melchoir tore at a fingernail with his teeth.

"The doctors . . .," he said. "Have you looked in a mirror?"

"Hell, no! I've had the bum's rush ever since I pulled in."

"The doctors say you're only twenty-three years old."

The words were meaningless. Dare spread his hands before his face, staring at the smooth white flesh of his hands, strong and vibrant,

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clean of the blemish years can bring. He stared at his hands and fingered his face. His beard was long, uncombed, but the hair was silky, the beard a youth would grow if he preened it for years.

"You passed the speed of light!" Tress' husband broke in, speaking rapidly. "We don't know how long, or what speed you attained. We don't know the effect, except that the ship, you and everything in it, converted to radiant energy, and back again. You traveled six years faster than light. You've opened up the entire galaxy to us."

"Mason is my assistant," Melchoir explained.

Dare no longer cared. What matter if he had opened the way for man to swarm over the stars. Man was still composed of individual men with individual needs and pleasures. He was alone.

"He's had enough," Tress said softly. She touched Dare's cheek with her fingertips. "Come on. Drop down with us. You're staying at our place until you learn to walk in the world again."

"At your place! Don't you know anything about torture, or is that the idea?" For a moment, Dare was afraid he would cry. But he did not.

Here was a mature, sensible woman, not the savage lithe female animal he once had loved. He wondered if Tress had told her husband about that.

"It must be something like shock treatment," she insisted. "Don't you see, the sooner you adjust the better."

"And I want a record of your sensations during the flight," Mason said briskly.

His wife withered him with a glance.

"In a month, perhaps. Right now he needs mothering. That's all I can give him, you know." Mason shifted uncomfortably. A cold wind scattered the ashes and revealed the embers of love.

In the glass-walled room, Dare felt himself beginning to relax. Foam softness of the chair helped. The magnificent house was built into a cliff-wall overlooking the lush verdure of Tanganyika, a wild African landscape preserved as a World Park. The rich living greenness began to mend his shattered spirit.

Tress brought in a decanter of crystal brown liquor, but hurried out to escape the embarrassed silence which fell between them. She was cool, self-composed, gentle and sympathetic. He wondered what had happened to the

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bright, vivacious woman he had loved. Of course, eighteen years would make a difference.

Dare poured a generous drink and sipped it slowly, gazing out the window. As nerve tension released he grew drowsy and slept. Tress came in again to wake him for dinner.

A needle shower and change into a light silken suit. Clean muscle looseness told him his body was young, throwing off the violent agony, pushing it back to dull and die in the years ahead. After all, he had a new fifteen years to play with.

Dinner was delicious, luxurious, but subtle tension charged the air. Mason spoke little more than monosyllables while Tress forced a light, amusing flow of conversation, filling him with the years of Earth he had lost.

Had they quarreled about him? For the first time he found amusement in the ludicrous situation, a boy returned to claim a woman who had been married for seventeen years. With a keen flash of memory of Tress' intimate beauty, Dare wondered how that marriage had gone, and how many times his ghost had trod the boards.

The marriage appeared superficially successful—a beautiful woman in a beautiful home with a VIP husband who soon would take over the Space Directorate. That should make a woman happy.

Once, during a lull, he glanced up and met her eyes. The pain he saw there was more than pity, but she masked it quickly.

Dare dipped into the frozen dessert and stopped with the server halfway to his open mouth.

A young woman walked into the room, a lithe, beautiful young woman in a neat feminine uniform.

Reincarnation!

Her beauty struck him with the shock of gunfire. Blood drained away from his face. Tress turned a startled glance as the girl came in.

"I'm going, mother," she said, her words a delicious flow of sound. "This class runs a week."

Tress did the only thing she could.

"Trill, this is Dare Langen," she said simply. She turned to Dare. "This is our daughter. She was born two years after you left." Dare felt the cool young hand in his but there was no other sensation except vertigo.

"I'm so happy you're here,"

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Trill said. "They told me about you."

Dare found the pattern then and the rage of frustration exploded like a volcano. He stood up, trembling, holding the chair to keep from falling.

"You're trying to drive me crazy!" he shouted. "You want to kill me. You plotted to bring me here so I could see the wonderful home you built while I discovered the stars. You want me to be a vacuum and collapse in it."

"I'm sorry." Trill's face had gone white. "I'm so very sorry," she whispered.

"Your mother said that! Everyone's sorry. But what does anyone do? You think you can wrap the years back," he sneered, "mate me off, teach me to love your daughter and everything will be all right."

Trill backed away, trembling. Dare slumped down, unable to stand, and held his head in his trembling hands.

"We don't want you to love our daughter," Mason said coldly. "One generation of heartbreak is enough." Tress moved to comfort him.

"Leave him alone!" Mason said sharply.

Trill was gone. For a moment Dare thought it had been a hallucination, an insane distortion of his empty dream. Then he followed the age-old impulse of man—he ran physically from the terrible pain.

He ran to the terrace and the jet 'copter that had flown him to the African home of the people who hated him.

Dare found his way to London.

He was a week drunk in London.

He ran raging through the streets; slept in drunken stupor; staggered awake to drink again, but never did he lose the vision of a passionate young woman returned from the past to touch him with empty hands.

Everywhere they knew him. Already the history tapes carried the beautiful tragic new-day story of Romeo and Juliet, the lovers who met emotional death in vain.

London cared for him.

When he had had enough, London sent him back.

He awoke, sick and remorseful, in the same room.

Trill was sitting beside his bed. The loveliness of her body was luminous in a filmy frock, light and airy. A spasm shook his body when he saw her.

"Don't," she whispered, "please don't." Her fingers on

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his forehead quieted the trembling of his body.

"I won't," he said, "anymore. It's my turn to be sorry."

"No it isn't," she said impulsively. "We're all at fault. The world is so happy to find the stars they forget the twisted heart of one man. They think being a hero is enough. Mother was trying to help. I was just an accident at that moment."

"Yes, I know," Dare grinned crookedly. He noticed Trill did not mention her father. He changed the subject.

"You're back from school?"

"Only for a little while. I go back to New York again next week."

Dare pushed back the coverlet and walked to the window. Trill was waiting when he turned. He tried to talk quietly, sensibly.

"You came to help me with my problem," he said. "I don't know how. You know I love you, even though you're only sixteen."

Trill nodded.

"I didn't fall in love with you," he said slowly, trying to clarify it for himself. "I loved you in your mother. I can't be different now."

"I don't love *you*," Trill said. "Mother made you live in my blood, but I don't love you because you haven't touched me yet. When you do, I think I will."

Her delightful simplicity drenched his spirit like a crystal spring on a Martian desert. Dare felt the surge of youth in his blood, stronger than the night he spoke his farewell to this girl's mother.

But that brought only pain. He restrained the impulse to take her and win back the joy he had lost. But he touched her. He held her in his arms, gently, until the puzzled gray light in her eyes turned to understanding.

They were startled by a knock on the door. It opened instantly. Trill's father stood on the threshold. He stared at the two of them. Dare became aware that he was wearing only the bottom half of his pajamas.

"Trill, your mother wants you," Mason said coldly. The girl hurried from the room.

"I see you've recovered," Mason said acidly.

Trill returned to New York.

Dare followed her, but it was two weeks before he could find her. In the interim he visited Melchoir in the penthouse of the Star Building.

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"You look better," Melchoir welcomed him warmly.

"I feel better," Dare said. "I want to go to work."

"Good," Melchoir said. "I hoped you'd come around before Mason takes over. He does next month, you know." Somehow the thought chilled Dare. His life still belonged to the quasi-military Star Exploration Division.

But he worked. First with doctors, then with scientists while they drained his brain sponge of every impression it had received in his fantastic flight beyond light. He worked with technicians to learn what they were learning from him. And he saw the *Star IV* shaping in blueprint to bridge C-velocity under control.

The starman saw Trill at least twice a week, but it wasn't easy. Each time he called the warm eagerness poured through to him in her voice, but each time she agreed only hesitantly to meet him.

She loved him. He was sure of that. His spirit was healing. It was only a matter of time until they would be married. The only brake was Trill's father who protected his daughter with Puritan zeal and cast a remote chill whenever their paths crossed.

One night Dare took Trill to dinner. She was quiet and ate little.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

She looked tenderly into his eyes. He recognized it. It was the way Tress looked the day he returned from far-off Ophiuchi.

"Dare . . ." Trill paused, searching for words. "You remember once I told you I would love you if you touched me?" He nodded. "I have loved you, ever since. But I can't love you any longer."

"You're joking!"

"No," she shook her head, "I mean it. It must be this way."

"You mean your father?" he asked, and laughed uneasily to dispell the gloom. "This isn't the 20th Century you know. I thought parents were over the old habit of dictating to their children."

Tears filled her eyes. "It isn't just my father. It's . . ."

"It's what?" he shouted. He had not realized that only a thin veneer had grown over his near plunge into psychosis. "You mean this has been just good clean fun, is that it? You were the therapist. But now I'm back in working order, I'm big enough to go out alone, to walk again. Is that it?"

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Trill drew back from the whip of his words.

"No, Dare! Please, it isn't that. I just can't love you anymore."

She took her silver purse in trembling hands and stood up, staring at him.

"Thanks for the lesson," Dare said. "I've had two now." Trill ran out of the cafe. He did not follow. He was still there an hour later when a messenger brought him a sealed envelope.

The note was from Mason. In abrupt words, it ordered him to report to Star Headquarters.

"Haven't seen you for several weeks," Mason said. "How's the vacation?"

"Vacation?"

"Yes. We gave you a year's leave of absence to recuperate. Our last medical and psych reports indicate you're in top condition."

"Sure," Dare said, "I feel great." The physical machine went on ticking despite emotional destruction.

"Good," Mason said. "The *Star III* will be ready to go next week."

"Star III?"

"Yes. Colonists. We're sending seventy-two out to Ophiuchi Alpha. You're the pilot."

So he thought he had done his duty for mankind.

"You don't want me to marry your daughter," Dare said softly. Mason's face reddened.

"That has nothing to do with it."

"You're a liar," Dare gritted. "You don't want me to have any contact with you or your family. You've got a guilt complex because you destroyed my life. Here's a good way to get rid of me forever."

"All right," Mason said slowly. "That's part of it. But I'm the director now."

"Yes, you're the director," Dare said, controlling his rage, "and I'm expendable. Are you going to keep me shuttling back and forth between stars until I'm back to diapers?"

"You won't touch C," Mason said. "We can control that now. You'll grow older, slowly, but you'll be older when you get there. A year from now the *Star IV* will go out with technicians at C plus .225. They'll pass you and set up the physical plant for the colonists. You report at 0600 the 21st. Is that clear?"

"It's clear," Dare said slowly. Many things were clear. He had lost Tress because she promised to wait;

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now Trill was lost because such a promise could not be kept.

Dare hit the town again.

This time military police found him in a dark bar in the suburbs. They brought him in, but not before two of the MPs received bloody noses.

They held him in the guardhouse for two days, then four MPs took him to the space station.

Friends and relatives mobbed the base of the *Star III*, an excited crowd seeing their loved ones off to the stars. Dare felt scores of eyes upon him as he marched, humiliated, in the hollow square formed by the stiff, uniformed guards.

He saw Mason and stopped. The Star Director nodded coolly. Dare's hatred was a lump of hot lead in his throat.

"What makes you think you can force me to make this flight? How do you know I won't turn and bring it back?"

Mason smiled thinly. "You will ride a radio beam," he said. "You can't lose it."

"You'll hate me until your women stop loving me, won't you?"

Dare's words triggered Mason's hidden neuroses. The director snarled like an animal and leaped at the spaceman. His fist struck Dare's mouth and blood spurted from his lip.

Dare's reflexes were quick. Two guards tumbled when he hit them rolling. Then he was on his feet, hammering the paste-white face of the director. Mason crumpled.

When Dare straightened, he was looking down the muzzles of four guns.

"Put 'em away, boys," he said tiredly. "I'm going."

The colonists were aboard. The crowd watched silently as Dare walked slowly up the ramp.

He heard a scream and turned.

A slight figure wriggled through the crowd and raced up the ramp. Trill bounced into his arms like a frightened kitten.

"What the hell—"

"Hurry!" she panted. "Get in. Lock the hatch."

The huge door moved shut on hydraulic hinges. He half-pushed, half-carried her up the passageway through lines of gaping passengers to the cabin.

"It's good of you to come," Dare said coldly, "but now you'd better get the hell out of here. I'm sure you and your

(*Concluded on page* 113)

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By RANDALL J. ROSS

CROSS INDEX

The most heavily guarded man in the world was the President of the United States. Yet he found himself at the mercy of a polite young man with a ray gun—and the strangest request the human mind could imagine!

THE President of the United States was surprised to find a strange man in his private chambers, but he closed the door after him and sat calmly down at his desk. The stranger, an ordinary-looking, bespectacled young man, stood up and smiled.

"Mr. President?"

"That's right." The President paused a moment. "I hope you realize, young man, that this is a pretty serious offense. I don't know how you got here through the Secret Service men, but you could be shot for attempting to assassinate the President."

The stranger continued to smile. "But I'm afraid this is a very special case, sir.

"Special?"

"That's right."

"How special?"

"Mr. President, I'm the representative of a . . . foreign government."

The President leaned back. "I see," he said. "I'm afraid your unusual method of interviewing me puts a rather bad light on your intentions."

"No. You don't understand, sir," said the young man. "At this moment other representatives of my government are speaking with the heads of Great Britain and the Soviet Union."

"England and Russia . . . What country do you represent . . ."

"Well, I was born in a place called Flanthia . . ."

"Flanthia?"

The young man watched him. "But I am a spokesman of the Galactic Confederacy."

The President looked at him a moment, then exhaled and fumbled for a pack of cig-

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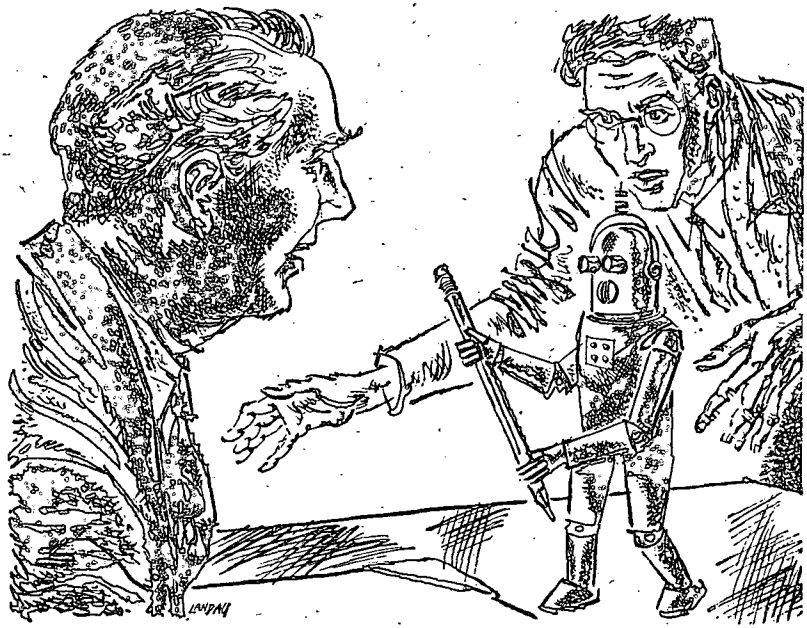

The robot picked up the pencil and walked toward the President.

arettes. He lit one of them carefully and watched the smoke. After a minute, he looked back at the stranger.

"Now, young man," he said, "let's go about this logically. I have three alternatives to believe. You're either crazy, or trying to pull a hoax for some reason, or else you really *are* from a Galactic government. I don't think you'd come to me without proof."

"That's perfectly right, Mr. President. I do have proof. I happen to have brought with me a ray-gun and a robot—two common articles of manufacture in the Galactic Confederacy. This—" he held out a cigarette-sized cylinder—"is a ray gun. Now watch." He pointed the cylinder at a chair across the room—and, soundlessly, the chair disappeared.

The stranger reached in one of his pockets and brought out a small man-shaped doll, which he set on the desk. "The robot, Mr. President." He touched the doll, and it suddenly came to life, walking across the desk and turning objects over and examining them curiously. The young

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man looked fondly at the robot. "It's a wonderful toy for children."

"Yes," said the President, "I can see that." His voice was calm, but his hands trembled very slightly. "I don't have to tell you that I believe you now, Mr.—ah—"

"Call me Al."

"Al. So you really *are* from the Galactic Confederacy. So there really *is* a Stellar Government. So there *are* other living beings in the Universe. But—do you have some special purpose in seeing me?"

"Yes, I do, Mr. President. It's about—well, about your hydrogen bombs."

"I see," said the President. "I see. You mean the Galactic Confederacy has been watching Earth, and they saw that we Earthmen had developed atomic energy and were about ready to go to Space, and they were afraid we would carry atomic war to the stars, so they want us to join the Confederacy?"

The young man from the stars seemed embarrassed. "Wait a minute, Mr. President," he said," "it's not quite that way."

"Not that way? So it's an ultimatum? Listen, mister—Al, Earth may be a small planet, and we may not have the resources of your government, but we humans have always been a proud race, and jealous of our freedom. If it comes to war, we will fight, fight to the death."

"Mr. President, no!" said Al. "It's not that way at all. You don't understand me."

"I understand that you want to take away one of our rights."

"But it isn't a right, Mr. President."

"We recognize it as a right. We recognize our right to make hydrogen bombs and defend ourselves and do as we see fit."

"Oh, we aren't concerned with that. You can make war as much as you have to. You can use rockets, swords, poison gas, bacteria, anything except hydrogen bombs. I'm afraid we can't permit you to use any explosives involving nuclear fusion."

"Sir, that is our right. We will exercise that right or we will declare war on your Confederacy."

The young man smiled faintly.

"Don't underestimate us!" said the President.

"Oh, we don't underestimate you, we don't at all. We know you are perfectly capable of creating a bomb that will ignite the nitrogen of

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Earth. You can easily destroy a most complicated mechanism."

"Mechanism?"

"Yes. That's what I'm trying to tell you about. We are interested in your use of hydrogen bombs because the interior of your earth is a tremendous piece of equipment owned by the Galactic Confederacy."

"Equipment? What sort of equipment?"

"Your whole earth—all the interior from thirty miles down—is a huge machine somewhat like your electronic calculators. This machine, which holds billions of items of information, is used by the Confederacy as an automatic library—an information center. Information from this machine is broadcast throughout the entire Confederacy."

The President smiled wanly. "That sort of knocks down our ego, doesn't it? Earth—our entire world—is used by the Confederacy only as its main library. Only a library. But at least we have that weapon to use against you—we can destroy all the knowledge of your union if we choose. Sir, Earth holds a club over your head."

Al, who had been leaning against the wall all this time, sighed and sat down. "Mr. President, you still don't comprehend what I'm trying to tell you. If you'll just think a moment, it'll be clear. Our Confederacy embraces this galaxy, and the Magellanic Clouds, and parts of what we call the Second and Third Galaxys. Think, Mr. President. Think of all the many, many worlds that includes. Think of the billions of people on each world—a few worlds far below you in culture, but most of them far above you. Think of all the immense knowledge accumulated over the centuries by so many people."

The President's Earth ego was in a vice that was slowly squeezing down. "Then—Earth—is only a branch library?"

Al's eyes were pitying. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I wanted to break it to you gently. Earth is just a part of a branch library—a very small part. But don't feel bad, sir—Earth does contain all Galactic knowledge on one subject."

"One—subject?"

"That's right, Mr. President," said Al, smiling. "If you employ enough hydrogen bombs, you would destroy Earth. And Earth contains every bit of information known to the Galaxy—on sewage disposal." **THE END**

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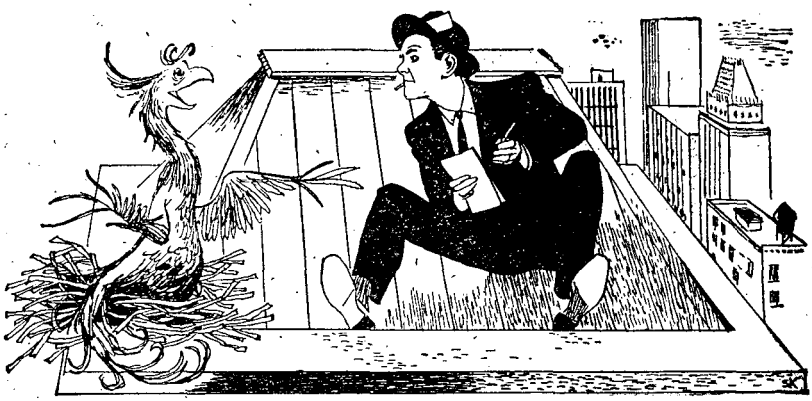

END OF THE LINE

By THOMAS N. SCORTIA

The one thing that makes a good reporter is an ability to get the real story, even though it's too hot to print. Like interviewing a phoenix!

WHEN the City Editor of the Gazette received word that a phoenix was building her nest on the very peak of the dome of the city hall, he naturally sent his best reporter speeding to the scene. The reporter, an intrepid young man known for his resourcefulness, decided that little was to be gained by observing the coming immolation from the pavement below and, after bribing a janitor, gained access to the ledge surrounding the base of the dome and climbed the narrow metal ladder to the peak

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where the bird was engaged in her labors.

"You realize," he said, accosting the phoenix, "that this is a very unorthodox place in which to build a nest, especially with the end you have in mind?"

"I do," the bird said, pausing in its work, "but there is no higher point in this area and I don't have enough strength remaining to make it west to some peak in the Rockies."

"Tell me," said the reporter, remembering his professional duties, "Is it true that there is only one of your kind?"

"That's quite correct," said the phoenix, selecting a long shred of cellophane from a pile of debris balanced delicately on the slope of the dome. She began swiftly to weave it into the nest, following an intricately beautiful pattern.

"And when you become old, you build a nest and set fire to it while you are in it?"

"Yes," said the bird wearily.

"And arise reborn from the ashes?"

"Quite true."

"But," the reporter said, frowning, "I thought you were indigenous to the East."

"I was originally," the bird agreed. "However, since the phoenix is a symbol of ever-renewing youth, I decided to migrate to a more appropriate locale."

"Here in the Mississippi Valley?"

"Don't be silly," the bird said. "I was on my way to Hollywood, but I foresaw that I would die before I completed the flight."

"You can foresee your death, then?"

"Of course, as well as other events. I have precognition, you see."

"Precognition? That means you can predict coming events, doesn't it?"

"Yes," the phoenix said, beginning to weave a scrap of newspaper into the nest which was nearly finished.

"Such as the outcome of the next election and who will win the World Series and . . ."

"Oh, that and much more," the bird said, settling itself into the completed nest. "But don't ask me to," she said. "Everyone's always asking for a free prediction. Very exasperating."

"I had no intention," protest the reporter.

"Yes, you did," contradicted the bird. "Anyway, there's only a few minutes left before twelve."

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"Is that when . . . ?"

"Yes," said the phoenix. "Promptly at noon." The reporter paused and eyed the nest.

"That's not quite the nest I had expected," he remarked at last. "I thought you were supposed to use sandlewood and various other exotic plants."

"Now, tell me," the bird said impatiently, "where would I get sandlewood around here?"

"You do have a point," the reporter agreed. "I notice," he added with a small glow of pride, "that you have used my paper as part of your nest." He pointed to a large piece of newsprint bearing the masthead *The Gazette* and a black headline below.

"Yes. Not a very satisfactory texture, however." The phoenix squirmed uncomfortably. "Do you have the correct time?" she said.

"It's one minute to twelve," the young man offered. "I suppose you ignite spontaneously?"

"I'm afraid that part of the legend isn't quite true," the phoenix sighed. "Usually in the past I've had help."

"Oh," said the reporter, "I didn't know. Can I offer you a match?"

The bird eyed the shred of newspaper whose black headlines said: "AEC to Test Cobalt Bomb Today Noon."

"That will not be necessary," she said. **THE END**

While My Love Waits

(Concluded from page 106)

father can arrange a suitable match for you."

"I'm your co-pilot," Trill said impishly. "See here."

She handed him her papers.

"They're forged."

"Of course," she giggled, "but if my man's going to live forever, I'm going along for the ride."

"But what—"

"Oh, stop worrying." She tweaked his nose. "I've seen the manifest. There's a parson in the cargo."

THE END

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"Drink up, darling," she cooed. "This will make a new man of you!"

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LOVE THAT POTION

By WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

The incredible adventures of Reggie Van Ameringen rapidly are becoming classics in the field of fantasy. Of them all, none is more hilarious than this episode in which he sets out to help a lovely girl find the ingredients for a love potion —only to find himself on the wrong end of the eye of a newt!

"EXCUSE me, but would you know where I could find the eye of a newt?"

Reggie Van Ameringen put down his tall frosted glass and looked suspiciously at the young lady who was sitting beside him at the bar. She was a very lovely blonde, with wide blue eyes, a gamin little face, and a figure that might have been designed by a sex-starved engineer. "Well, well," Reggie said. "The eye of a newt, eh?"

"That's right. I wonder if you know where I could find one."

They were alone at the bar, and only a few couples were

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scattered about the wide cool lounge. It was three in the afternoon, and Reggie was waiting for his fiancée, Sari. "It's a bit odd you know, but I was just thinking about newts, myself," he said. "You aren't a mind reader, by any chance?"

"Oh, no."

"Was I talking to myself? Running on about newts in a low babbling voice?"

"Do you do that often?" The girl was smiling at him pleasantly.

"Well, quite a bit. Not about newts particularly. But other things. It helps pin the old thought tight to the old gray matter." He raised his empty glass. "How about a drink?"

"I'd love that."

"Tophole." Reggie called the bartender and explained that he wanted two more drinks, one for himself and one for the young lady. He began to tell the bartender about the newt business, but the man escaped hurriedly to the end of the bar; he knew all about Reggie's conversational madnesses, and he wanted no more of them. Once he had gone out and got drunk after Reggie had explained why he didn't like cheese. It started with an uncle who had cornered the yogurt market in Persia, and wound up with a cousin who had loosed two hundred lobsters on the floor of the Met during the *Sextet* from Lucia. What this had to do with Reggie's aversion to the cheese the bartender had never learned. But he had felt his brain cracking ominously as he tried to follow the torturous twists of the story. That was why he wanted no part of the newt business.

"I think our bartender is a little abrupt," the girl said.

"Charlie? Perish the thought. Soul of courtesy and tact." Reggie nodded firmly. "Curious chap, though. Full of little tics. Can't stand cheese. Spent a whole afternoon telling me about it. Well, spice of life and all the rest of it."

"But getting back to newts," the girl said. "Do you think you could help me find one?"

"Easiest thing in the world. Great old buddy of mine named Freddy Myrtlehead breeds them. I was thinking about him and his newts just a bit back."

"Why does he breed newts?"

"It's a good longish story." Reggie's fresh drink had arrived and he took a meditative pull at it. "Freddy had a

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farm in the country. Queer place for a farm maybe, but there it was: barns, house, pastures, all the rest of it. Freddy's father gave it to him. Get Freddy into the open air, give him keen eyes, things like that. But Freddy didn't like the look of the place. So he paved it."

The girl choked on her drink. "Are you serious?"

"Oh, quite. Freddy tore down all the buildings, wrecked the silo, turned the cows loose on the highways, shot the chickens, and hired a bloke to come in and pave the whole bloody place. Miles of it. Took all summer."

"And then what happened?" the girl said. Some of her composure had disappeared; she was watching Reggie with an expression blended of confusion and alarm.

"Well, Freddy's Governor raised quite a fuss. So to calm him down Freddy put in some newts in his apartment. Breeding them, you see. Same thing as a farm, actually. Animals growing, messing up the place, hay on the floor."

The girl said, "Do you think he could let me have an eye from one of his newts?"

"Oh, quite. He's deuced generous about them. Nothing stingy about old Freddy. Friend wants a newt. 'Take half a dozen,' old Freddy tells him."

"He sounds marvelous. Could we go to see him now?"

Reggie hesitated, and a little frown stole over his pleasantly vacant face. Freddy was officially Off Limits. That was Sari's sternest injunction. No more Freddy. She had been dashed firm about it, ever since he and Freddy had tried to buy Mexico. "Well, I'll give you his address," he said unhappily. "Same thing, really. Freddy will take good care of you."

"But I simply couldn't go to a stranger and ask him for one of his newts."

"I suppose not," Reggie said thoughtfully. "Pretty cheeky business."

"Couldn't you come with me? Please. It's so terribly important."

Reggie didn't doubt this for a minute. Anyone who needed the eye of a newt undoubtedly needed it in the worst way. "Well, I'm not supposed to see Freddy," he confessed. "My girl doesn't like him."

The girl smiled. "She needn't know, of course. I'll never tell. And I'll bet you're a regular old clam when you have to be."

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"That's right. Just button the old lip up tight and no one's the wiser."

"Shall we go then?"

"Righto."

Reggie paid his tab and then looked admiringly at the girl as she paused to wait for him at the exit. Quite a stunner, really. And a brain to boot. Coming up with that business about not telling Sari! Why in the deuce hadn't he thought of it? Sari would like her, he thought dreamily. That silver-blonde hair, and the heavy eye make-up, it was quite neat. And she had gorgeous legs, slim and graceful in sheer nylons, and the little black suit she wore looked as if it had sprayed onto her body. Particularly around the hips. Yes, Sari would find her great fun. Might be well to toss them together some day. Great friendships started that way.

The thought of Sari brought another little frown to his face. Something about her had slipped his mind. He shrugged helplessly. No use chasing after the wiggling little thought now. Probably lurking in the deepest pool in his head.

He strode across the room and tucked the girl's hand under his arm. "Well, let's go a-newting," he said cheerfully. . . .

Sari arrived at the lounge about ten minutes after Reggie and the girl had departed. The bartender looked at her sadly and shook his head. He didn't speak.

"Oh, dear, what is it now?" Sari said. She was a petite, slender red-head, with eyes that were blue or green depending on her mood. At the moment they were very green.

"Some dame picked him up," the bartender said. "She eyed him like a cobra looking at a fat chicken and planning the menu. Then she moved in."

"Was she attractive?" Sari said, in a voice that tried for casualness and missed by fifty feet.

"In a kind of flashy way," the bartender said. "They struck up a nice conversation about newts."

"Newts," Sari said, tapping a small foot slowly on the floor. "Did you by any chance hear the name of that peerless ass, Freddy Myrtlehead mentioned?"

"No, I just got the newt pitch, and then I turned out. Look, I'm an old man with flat feet, Miss, but why don't you tell that guy to get lost?"

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"Because he would," Sari said sadly. "And then I'd have to go and find him. . . ."

Reggie and the girl arrived at Freddy Myrtlehead's in very high spirits. Her name was Dee Light, which she had taken for the stage. She wouldn't tell her real name, because she claimed it was too, too dull. In the cab she had sat close to him, hugging his arm companionably, and Reggie was pleasantly aware of the soft pressure of her body, and the far-from-subtle scent of her perfume. But at Freddy's they came on bad news. Freddy, a pear-shaped young man with glassy eyes and a high nervous laugh, explained that he had disposed of his newts several weeks back.

Dee looked as disconsolate as anyone with her endowments could look, and was only partially mollified by Freddy's suggestion that he whip them up a few pints of Martinis. But after a few drinks everyone's spirits picked up. Freddy stood at the mantel in a pose he had picked up from a big-game-hunting relative, and explained why he had got rid of his newts. It was a longish story, full of sub-plots, but the burden of it was the management had insisted that either he or the newts must clear out. Apparently it made no difference to the management which departed; in fact there was a healthy hint that they *both* go; but Freddy had circumvented this by coming down with mumps and being placed in quarantine.

Reggie listened jealously to this long account. "We've got to be trotting along," he said, catching Freddy between breaths. "Grand fund and all that. But there's more to life than a good laugh all around. Dee and I must find a newt."

Freddy peered into his drink and sighed. "People with a purpose in life. Very lucky, favorites of the Gods. I wish I had something to do."

Dee nodded sympathetically. "But with all your money I should think you'd be able to find ever so many things to do."

"Governor's got all the money tied up," Freddy muttered.

Dee cleared her throat. "Shall we go?" she said sweetly to Reggie.

Downstairs, Reggie blinked in the late afternoon sunlight. "I'm at a loss," he said. "Where to find a newt? That's

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the problem." Then a thought struck him. "Look, what do you want a newt for?"

Dee sighed and looked pensive. "I—I'm afraid you might not believe me."

"Well, why not? Lots of perfectly good reasons for wanting newts. That's why there *are* newts. Quite a mess if people wanted newts and there weren't any around."

"You are sweet," Dee smiled. "So—understanding. But it's a very long story. Would you like to go to my apartment? It's quiet and comfortable, and I could tell you all about it then."

"Tophole," Reggie said warmly. He was more certain than ever that Sari would like this girl. Bursting with hospitality, really. And Sari would appreciate that.

Dee didn't live in an apartment, actually; she lived in a very elegant hotel, and her room had a southern exposure and a terrace. Everything looked cosy and home-like; there was even a pipe in an ashtray on the coffee table. Dee picked it up with a laugh and put it in her mouth. "One of my secret vices," she said, and then put it out of sight. "Would you like to fix a couple of drinks while I get into something more comfortable?"

"More comfortable than what?"

"Than what I'm wearing, of course."

"You look pretty comfortable."

Dee smiled at him. "Don't you want me to change?"

Reggie found the conversation confusing. "You do just what you think best," he said, tossing the problem cleverly back into her lap. "I'll make a drink."

Dee returned in five minutes wearing black Bikini shorts and a bra. Her skin was tanned the color of honey, and she was displaying it to the legal limits. "Would you bring my drink to the terrace?" she asked Reggie. "I'm just a little pig about sun. I think the sun-worshipers were really on the right track, don't you?"

Reggie sighed. A grand girl, but her questions upset him. And in the midst of measuring out two Wimp Bloaters he had no time for distractions. He murmured something without looking up and went on with the complicated business of the Wimp Bloaters.

When he brought the drinks to the terrace Dee was lying face-down on a chaise lounge.

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"Would you mind putting a bit of lotion on my back?" she said, looking up at him and smiling slowly.

"Pip pip," Reggie said. Setting the drinks down, he picked up the bottle of suntan lotion and applied a smooth coat to her even smoother skin. "Well, cheers," he said, retrieving his glass. "Can't think of a finer way to kill time."

She giggled. "Naughty boy."

Reggie giggled too. "Like to drink, that's all. Can't do a thing about it." Sighing with contentment he sat down in a deep chair and closed his eyes.

Dee raised herself on one elbow and stared at him suspiciously. It was obvious from her expression that she hadn't known many men who closed their eyes when she was around in a bathing suit. Finally she managed a little smile. "You haven't asked me about the newts," she said, pouting.

"Slipped the old mind."

"You'll think I'm insane."

Reggie waved a languid hand. "Nasty word. Hear it all the time, for some reason. Family, lawyers, even old Sari, always prattling about somebody being insane."

Dee said, "I'm desperately in love with a man who doesn't even know I'm alive."

"Tell him, girl, tell him," Reggie said firmly. "Trot out the old birth certificate. Get a letter from a doctor. 'This girl alive' That sort of thing. Couldn't hurt. Might help. Drink?"

"No—no, thanks." Dee took a long breath that stretched her B-cups to the danger point. "What I mean is, he doesn't love me. And without him life isn't worth living. I — I'm ready to shoot myself."

"Messy business," Reggie said, frowning slightly. "If we put our old heads to it we might think of something neater. Gas!" He sat up, nodding cheerfully. "Much better. No fuss at all."

"Listen, wise guy," Dee said, with a distinct edge to her voice, "save your bright ideas for——" She stopped and recovered herself. "You just don't understand," she said, sighing deeply. "You're so contented and happy that you don't realize how much I'm suffering."

"I say," Reggie said, touched. "That bad, eh?"

"It's hideous. And—well, you *will* think I'm crazy, but I've found the recipe for a love potion, and I want to

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make it and use it. It's my only chance."

"Love potion, eh? One sip and the bloke goes starry-eyed? That sort of thing?"

"Yes," she said eagerly. "It's a potion I learned of from an old gypsy. And it works! I know it does."

"That solves all the problems. No gas, no pining for lost love. Slip the potion to the chap and pick out a ring. Neat."

"But I don't have the ingredients to make the potion. That's why I wanted the eye of a newt."

Reggie chewed this over thoughtfully. "Well," he said at last, "Freddy was my only newt-y friend. Another bloke keeps loons, but that wouldn't help, I dare say. Pop a loon instead of a newt into your dish and you might be in a sorry stew. Best not to tamper, eh?"

"Well, the newt wasn't *essential* to the potion," Dee said. "It was a substitute for something else actually."

"What?"

"Two hairs from the head of a red-haired virgin."

"Hmmm," Reggie said. "Shouldn't be too difficult. You must know lots of redheads."

"Yes, I do, but—" Dee looked embarrassed. "The other requirement is the stumbling block."

"What's that?"

"Well, the virgin part, silly."

"I wish Sari were here," Reggie said thoughtfully. "She's great at things like this."

"Great at virginity, you mean?" Dee said innocently.

"Problems," Reggie said. "Good head." Then he snapped his fingers. "Good head, and red as a carrot. I'll get the hairs from her."

"You're sure she won't mind?"

Reggie laughed. "She's a great sport. Be glad to help. You're sure two is enough? Might as well take a handful in case you mess up the first batch."

"No, two will be perfect." She came and knelt at Reggie's knee, and stared at him with wide grave eyes. "You are the sweetest man I've ever met. Why didn't I fall in love with you, I wonder?"

"Hard to say," Reggie said, getting briskly to his feet. "Well, I'm off. This shouldn't take long. Pip, pip, and all the rest of it."

After Reggie left, Dee poured herself a straight shot of whiskey and took it down neat. Then she shook her

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blonde head slowly. Her expression was dazed; she had seen a vast variety of men over the years, but Reggie was a shatteringly new experience.

A knock sounded. Without bothering to put on a robe Dee strolled across the room and opened the door. The man who stood in the corridor was short and stockily built, with a deceptively open face and smooth black hair. He wore a conservatively cut dark suit, a neatly figured tie, and his manner was pleasant and sincere. Entering the room he put his hat and coat on the sofa, and smiled at the girl.

"Well, bird-brain. how did it go?" he said. He still looked pleasant and sincere, a gentleman by breeding and instinct, but his eyes ruined the act; small and nervous, they were designed to follow the roll of crooked dice or to wink at a confederate in a rigged card game. Samuel Springer's eyes were meant to go with keyholes or pornographic literature. They were a decided business liability. Glasses were no help—they transformed him into a thieving owl.

"Bird-brain, yourself," Dee said, staring at him with active dislike. "You picked a rare one, I must say. Reggie What's-his-name. Where did you find him? In a Who's Who for mental patients?"

"I asked you how it went," Springer said. "Unnecessary question, of course. I should have known you'd louse it up."

"It's still alive," Dee said sulkily. "He didn't go mad at the sight of my maidenly body, but I've got a hook in him."

Springer sighed and sat down on the sofa. "This has got to work," he said. "Compared to me at the moment, a pauper could make like Ali Khan. I'm broke."

"So is that new?" Dee said, lighting a cigarette. She slid into a chair and dangled her legs over the arm. "You never had more than coffee-and-cakes money in the time I've known you. And that's been over a year."

"It has seemed like ten," Springer said, bowing gravely to her. "If we can take this character, Reggie, what joy it will be to kick you out the door."

"Listen, you creep," Dee said angrily. "Anybody does any kicking it will be me. Things were fine until I met you. Remember that, wise guy. And you were going to make a star out of me. Get me

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my own TV show. Big shot agent from New York."

Springer said patiently, "You couldn't get on a give-away show, bird-brain, even if you gave yourself away. When I met you your prospects were as follows: to marry the counterman in that hash house, or to work yourself up to cashier, and the latter possibility was remote since it would have meant that you had to count. And you can't count, bird-brain."

"Yeah? I was a respectable girl. My family was one of the best in town."

"Sure. There were only three families in town. One was full of drunks, and the other liked to set fires, as I recall. In that company you stood out brilliantly. The poor man's Jukes family, no question of it."

"You leave my family out of this," Dee said ominously.

Springer sighed again. "With the greatest of pleasure. Let us try to think of business. Our chump bought the idea of the love potion?"

"Yeah, you were right about him being screwy," Dee said reluctantly. "He seemed to think it was the most natural thing in the world. He's gone to get two red hairs from his girl-friend."

"All right," Springer said. "We'll keep working on him. He's got to be human in some respects." He looked clinically at Dee's long smooth brown legs, at her abundantly curved bosom. "He should make a pitch sooner or later. As a last resort we'll pull the potion gag. Let both of you drink it. The power of suggestion will work on him, if your charms fail us. Meanwhile I'll go and try to cadge lunch somewhere."

"How about me? They shut off room service here."

Springer rose and picked up his hat and coat. "I'll try to palm some celery and radishes from the salad," he said.

Dee swore impressively. "That's bird food."

"Right, bird-brain. I'll see you tonight, dismal as that prospect is."

Reggie arrived at Sari's apartment in the middle of the afternoon. When she opened the door he saw that all storm signals were flying; her eyes were green as holly, her lips were set in a tight, uncompromising line, her fingers were opening and closing with slow relish.

"Cheers," Reggie said in a hollow voice.

"Have we something to be cheerful about?" Sari said in a voice as soft and innocent

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as a purring bobcat's. "Precisely what are we celebrating? The fact that I was left hanging at a bar like some forgotten umbrella? Or your introduction to the charms of that dyed-in-the-wool blonde? Just what happened that brings you here to mouth, 'Cheers' on my doorstep?"

"I say, are you in a snit?" Reggie said anxiously. "You look a bit liverish, old thing. Might try a gin and tomato juice. Helps sometimes."

"I am not in a snit," Sari said slowly. "Nor am I liverish. I am simply and finally sick of being related in a loose sort of way to a man who——" Sari's voice broke. "To a man who—who is either stark crazy, or is the finest actor this side of the Abbey Theatre."

And with that she slammed the door in his face.

Reggie frowned and rubbed his long jaw. In a snit, no doubt of it. No good saying, "Not in a snit, not liverish." The facts were plain. In a snit, definitely.

Over the years Reggie had learned very little about women; he knew they were mildly potty and given to streaks of totally irrational behavior, but beyond that his knowledge was meagre. However, one thing he knew: time alone could fix up these snits. Girl got in a snit, nothing for a chap to do but lash everything in place, settle down with a bottle or two and wait for clear weather. Distance helped too. Go off a goodish bit—India say—and let everything calm down. He was thinking of something along this line when he recalled his errand. Have to settle that first.

He rapped briskly on the door. Sari opened it in a few seconds. There was no change in her manner, he noticed.

"Didn't you get the general idea?" she said.

"Now see here." Reggie fumbled with his hat. It was a perfectly simple sort of errand, but for some reason he was suddenly at a loss. "It's not for me, understand," he said, smiling uncertainly. "The thing is, it's her; it's she, that's it. She needs them; I don't."

"Are you drunk?"

"No, perish the thought. Had a few Wimp Bloaters with Freddy—" He stopped, blushing. Popped right out! Old clam Reggie!

"Oh, you were at Freddy's, eh?"

"Now look, Sari, dash it all! The girl needed a newt's eye, and old Freddy was the only bloke I could think of."

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"A newt's eye! What for?"

"Well, she's in love."

"With newts?"

"It's a perfectly clear business," Reggie said stiffly. "She loves a bloke. Bloke can't see her. So she's making a love potion. Needs a newt's eye. Simple enough, what?"

"It's simple enough, all right," Sari said. "Simple enough for you, at any rate. Good-bye."

She started to close the door but Reggie cried, "Please, the poor girl is in trouble."

"I'll bet," Sari said grimly. "And I'll bet she doesn't know his name either."

"Well, this love potion will clear everything up," Reggie said.

"She'll make a fortune with it then," Sari said. "Now get your foot out of this door, and take it away with you. Far away."

Reggie saw there was no point in pressing the matter further. Sari—for some mysterious feminine reason—was obviously out of sorts. Tomorrow she'd probably be up in the clouds. Whimsical creatures, he thought. Not a brain in their heads really. Just moonbeams and all that rot.

"I say, who's that in there?" he said, almost bursting with guile.

"Where?"

"In your living room, of course."

Sari turned around. Reggie selected two strands of fine golden hair, lifted his eyes to heaven, and yanked hard!

"Ouch!" Sari yelled, spinning around like a cat whose tail has been pulled.

But Reggie was already on his way down the stairs.

A strange little man pressed the buzzer of Reggie's apartment at roughly the cocktail hour. Clive, Reggie's tall and formidable valet, opened the door, regarded the little man with eloquently raised eyebrows. There was good reason for his questioning stare; the little man was brown as saddle-leather, wore a white turban, and sported a flowing black beard.

"Yes?" Clive said, and managed to convey by his tone the utter unsuitability of this chap on his doorstep.

"I look for a Reginald van Amer—Amering——" The little man gave up. He smiled sheepishly at Clive. "Is he here?"

"Not at the present. Who shall I say called?"

"Well——" The little man shrugged and tugged at his beard. "He is getting himself into serious trouble, I fear."

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Clive took the news calmly. "Perhaps you'd better come in," he said. . . .

The buzzer sounded again, about ten minutes later, and Clive found Sari standing in the corridor, looking very lovely and very anxious.

"Clive, the most terrible——"

"Now, now," Clive said. "I know all about it. Please come in. I want you to meet Ali Bulla, a distinguished visitor to our shores from far-off India."

Sari stared in confusion at the little man in the turban. The flowing black beard seemed to fascinate her; it curled down the front of his silken waistcoat, as ropy and luxurious as a well-cared-for snake. "How do you do?" she said faintly.

Ali Bulla bowed from the waist. "My pleasure."

Clive glanced at his watch. "Miss Sari, permit me to brief you on developments, as news commentators are fond of saying. Time is of the essence. The Master has got himself into a rather neat mess, even for him."

Sari sat down weakly. "He's absolutely mad. Or madder, I should say. He pulled a handful of hair from my head a few minutes ago, and then ran like a thief."

"It all fits in," Clive said judicially. He put the tips of his long fingers together and paced the floor frowning slightly. "The Master has fallen into the toils of a confidence team which consists (a) of a young woman whose character is no more honest than the color of her hair, and (b) a man named Springer who would stand out as a rapscallion in a Thugee gathering. Their intention is to involve the Master in an amatory situation with the young woman, and force him into a marriage which it would be understating matters to describe as catastrophic."

"Well, it would serve the silly fool right," Sari said brushing away a tear. Then: "But what are we going to do about it?"

"We must act with speed and firmness," Clive said. "The crux of their scheme turns on a love potion which they stole from our Indian visitor, Ali Bulla. They believe the potion to be the fruit of some quack, but the lotion is, in fact, authentic and powerful."

"Most powerful," Ali Bulla said, nodding in a pleased fashion.

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"Ali Bulla trailed these scoundrels to their hotel, realized that they had ensnared the Master, and therefore followed him here. Now we must strike!"

"But Clive, do you believe this nonsense about a genuine love potion?"

Clive smiled tolerantly. "I spent a good deal of time in India, Miss Sari. I *know* their love potions. In fact, a Maharini once attempted to——" He cleared his throat. "But that's another story. Now to call their hotel. . . ."

Reggie sat in the small kitchen, swigging a drink and watching in fascination as Dee prepared the love potion at the sink. She had changed from her Bikini into a filmy, peach-colored negligee which followed the lines of her full young body with loving attention. Her blonde hair brushed her shoulders, and her eyes glinted with mischievous excitement as she fussed about with vials and test tubes.

"Almost ready," she said in a happy, little-girl's voice. "Aren't you excited?"

"Oh, fearfully," Reggie said. Actually he was quite sleepy, but he didn't want to spoil the show.

"Did your girl mind parting with a bit of her lovely hair?" Dee said, smiling at him.

"Oh, not at all," Reggie said, waving a limp hand. "Sporting type and all the rest of it."

Dee came over and sat down on his lap. She put an arm around his neck and nuzzled her nose against his cheek. "You are a lamb," she whispered.

She was pretty heavy, Reggie thought. Looked light as a feather, but the fact was otherwise. Definitely otherwise.

"Where's the bloke?" he said.

"What 'bloke?' "

"The bloke you're stirring up the love potion for?"

"Oh, he'll be along shortly." She snuggled closer to him and crossed her legs. The robe parted, revealing a pink and dimpled knee. "I'm not impatient," she said. "Are you?"

Reggie yawned. "No, not a bit. Restful here, as a matter of fact."

Dee got to her feet and shook her head. Nothing worked with this character! She glanced at her watch. It was almost time for Springer.

One thing disturbed her; a half-hour ago the desk had called to explain that her room was needed for a prior

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reservation. Full of apologies, the hotel wished to transfer her to a suite at no increase in price. This was Springer's doing, she guessed, but she couldn't imagine why. . . .

"Look," she said to Reggie, "I'd like to try this love potion before my—ah—friend arrives. I know it's a lot to ask, but you've been such a dear I'm sure you won't mind."

"Mind what?"

"Well—trying it with me."

"First-rate idea," Reggie said. "No point using the old stuff if you're not sure of it."

Dee stared soulfully at him. "We'll really fall in love," she whispered. "I just know it. Then what will we do?"

Reggie frowned. "Just go off and forget each other, I suppose. It happens all the time in the movies. Bloke bites the bullet, wanders off to Africa and figures out cure for sleeping sickness." He yawned again, prodigiously. "Can't imagine what they do with the bloody cures, though. Not on the market, eh?"

"But you will take the chance?"

"Least a chap can do," Reggie said.

"But supposing we can't forget each other?"

Reggie laughed cheerfully. "No problem there. I can forget anybody. Even myself. Always forgetting who I am, for instance. One time I thought I was my father. Just a shaver then. Smoked his cigars, drank a snootful of brandy every night, raised a devil of a row. Another time—"

"All right, I get the idea," Dee said hastily. "Now here's what we have to do. You take a glass and I take a glass, and we go into the living room and turn out the lights. You understand?"

"Righto."

"In pitch darkness we each empty our glass. Then we turn on the lights. Are you ready?"

Reggie yawned again. "Pip, pip. Into the breach."

He accepted a glass of milky fluid from Dee, and strolled into the long living room. The sofa looked wonderfully inviting, he thought. Once this business was over, there'd be time for something important. A good session with the old downy. . . .

Dee moved to the light switch. "You stand at the end of the room now," she said. "I'll turn off the lights and count to five. Then we'll drink the potion. All right."

Reggie waved a hand. "Fine," he said, yawning.

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Dee threw the switch. Darkness filled the room.

"One!" Dee said firmly.

Then: "Two!"

A hand closed over Reggie's mouth. Someone took the drink from him. . . .

"Five," Dee said. "Drink up now!"

"Awwwwk!" Reggie said.

The lights came up.

The hand removed itself from Reggie's mouth.

"Sorry, sir," Clive said.

Reggie wasn't surprised to see Clive; Clive had a habit of popping up unexpectedly. But he *was* surprised to see a stocky young man who stood in the middle of the room staring with dishonest but soulful eyes at Dee. And Dee was staring at him in the same rapt fashion.

In their hands were empty glasses!

"Darling," Dee said, taking a step toward him.

Springer let the glass fall from his hand. "Dearest," he murmured. Lost in each other, transfixed with the glory of it all, they embraced.

"All's well," Reggie said, nodding crisply to Clive. He liked to be crisp with Clive. It mitigated his suspicion that Clive thought him an ass.

"They are a pair of swindlers, sir," Clive said. "It was their intention to swindle *you*. Fortunately we were able to persuade the chap to drain the potion that was meant for you."

"All's well, then," Reggie said crossly. "I told you, didn't I?"

Clive took his arm. "If you will step into the bedroom, please."

Reggie was pleased at this turn. Change the old subject. He strolled into the room. It was quite dark. "I say!"

The light flashed on. Sari stood at the switch, tapping a small foot slowly on the rug.

"Turn around," she said

"What ho! Quite!"

Smiling, Sari reached out and twirled several locks of his hair around her finger. Then she yanked hard!

"Ouch!" Reggie shouted. He turned around and looked at her with wounded eyes. "I say, that's a beastly trick."

"I'm making a love potion," Sally said in the same sweet voice. "And we're going to drink it together. And then we'll get married. Won't that be delightful?"

Reggie was not quite the fool he seemed. He knew that after once a chap got married a chap went to bed! And that was a splendid idea.

"I can't wait," he said, taking Sari in his arms. **THE END**

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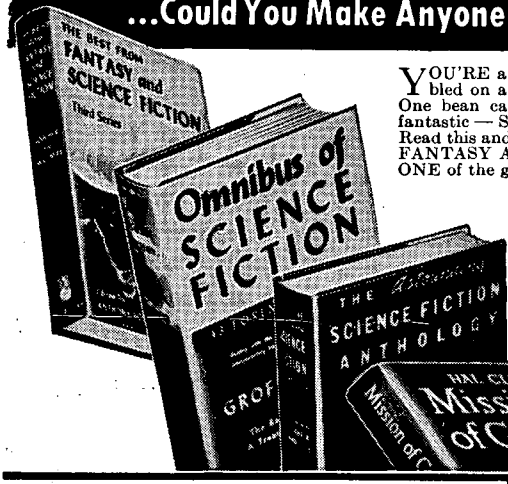

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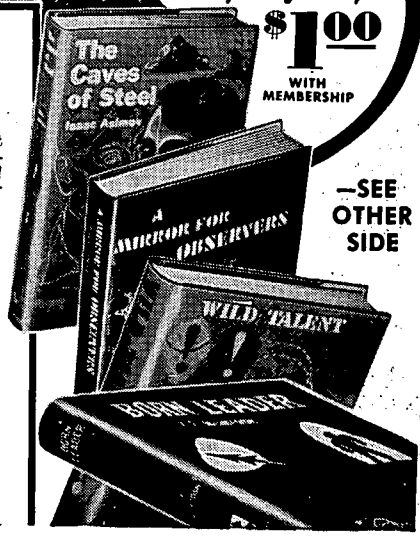

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